Funky Projects & Workplace Projects

Asier Perez

Trevor James

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PERIPHERAL AWARENESS
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Vickery
Aesthesis//Create

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IXIAR GARCIA, THE CREATIVE DIRECTOR OF FUNKY PROJECTS, TALKS TO ITS DIRECTOR AND FOUNDER, ASIER PEREZ translated from the Spanish by Martin Hardie.

Funky Projects Ltd [www.funkyprojects.com] was set up by interdisciplinary artist Asier Perez in late 2002. He defines it as an ‘ideation company for social innovation and strategic design’. It is a business that will engage in almost any project, social, cultural, and commercial, utilising their own distinctive creative and entrepreneurial methods.

Ixiar: What was it that gave you the idea of moving from art to business?

Asier: The art projects I had been doing were all the time becoming more complex economically, and at the same time our attempts at having some social influence were always reduced to the field of art representation. The projects lost their potential for social transformation as they were always labeled with the tag of ‘art’. I started to think about the economy, not only the idea of money, but as a better field of social relations. The idea was to move to an economic field and to have a platform with a business form that offered services to clients, within a service economy and within a liberal market.

Ixiar: When you were working in art, did your projects have this objective of social transformation?

Asier: Yes, but it was impossible to exercise any social transformation because we were in this area that was protected by the idea of ‘contemporary art’, both in the way it was financed and undertaken. There was neither a valorisation nor an assumption of the transformative capacities of the projects.
Ixiar: Can you remember now which project it was that gave you the impetus to make this change? What was the moment or phase that gave rise to this necessity?

Asier: It was with the realisation of two large projects. One was in 2000, Funky Baskenland, that I did with Casco Projects of Utrecht, and the other was Kissarama in Belfast in 2001 for the Belfast Festival at Queens. The last project tried to beat the Guinness World Record for couples kissing simultaneously at the same location. In the development of these projects I was now within the field of economic logics and I was learning more each time how the system of offering services functioned and how to be economically recompensed for them. We also introduced criteria to measure the success of the projects in relation to their stated objectives. I had started another business, earlier in 1999. It was a business that, when I look back at it 8 years later, you can see that I was playing more with the aesthetics of the business and the aesthetics of contemporary economics (like it is understood in the symbolic fields of art), rather than exercising a social interlocution as a result of the economic activity of that business.

Ixiar: Did the fact of being in business inspire you aesthetically or was it a structure that ...

Asier: Yes, it was very attractive. It is going to sound very tacky, but I remember reading a book by Bill Gates and how he created Microsoft etc. Perhaps Bill Gates was a bit of a b******d, I don't know if he could extract any creative value, but it was like a transformation of many social habits. There is something that still continues today to be fundamental to any process Funky Projects is involved in, that is to learn and to generate knowledge from whatever practice. I believe that in the field of art I was simply fenced in; the apprenticeship was not exciting and didn't generate any greater knowledge. I decided that I had to explore other fields of work where I could have new adventures with knowledge. Now we have other problematics to deal with, like how to make the various knowledge of the components of the business subjective, whilst at the same time sharing in a work team that is made up of six people within Funky Projects.

Ixiar: What were the first things that happened in creating the business? The creation of the business started to develop new forms of working, with other people, you moved in other circles ...

Asier: We were very ingenious and a lot more spontaneous than now, including the way we valued the economic aspects, we thought that some of the services that we were offering were high quantity and that we were going to make a lot of money. On the other side, we believed that we had to dress up in suits everyday, and stupid things like that. The wealth that we produced wasn't just economic, and the knowledge that we generated wasn't only for suits. I remember one of the first meetings that we started with, for example, with Athletic Bilbao (Bilbao's professional football team): these meetings were super fun and it was exciting to be next too a whole lot of super executives with us proposing de-structured ideas and at the same time with these ideas we gave them a creative strategy with which to reach their objectives and even to widen their objectives. I think that since I started Funky Projects nearly 5 years ago I have learnt a lot about the business world, how it functions, about working with teams of people, how we could manage creativity and the incrementation of these projects through creativity and client relations. As the founder of Funky Projects, at times I think that I invested 10 years working in contemporary art as an artist, and maybe within 5 years, when I will have been in business for ten years, I don't think that it will have stopped feeding me intellectually such that I will want to change my field of work. In any event the energy of Funky Projects doesn't fall back solely on Asier Peréz as founder -- it is an entity with the capacity of going much further than the biography of any one person.

Ixiar: What do you think is the difference between what we do in Funky Projects and contemporary art? Have you got anything to say about this?

Asier: In art there exists an a-priori or axiom that art is whatever, or it is anything that is presented in the field of art. We aren't putting forward our activities as being within the field of art, evidently we rework many ideas from art and I believe that our art education (three people who work in Funky Projects have studied Fine Arts) has served us as an apprenticeship for the generation of ideas, like in the investigation, production of projects of reflection in action ... with our current activity...
一切皆为创造力，每一件事皆为想法，需要被导向以实现我们的客户所要求的目标。

Ixiar: 你认为艺术能找到更多影响，或在社会转变中产生更多的效果吗？

Asier: 我不这么认为。这是一个讨论，我认为它已经失去了力量，它已经疲惫，这将不会带我们去任何地方。艺术，它以现在的方式在视觉上呈现于文特纳和威尼斯双年展，似乎与20年前的呈现方式没有差别。艺术市场经济学，艺术家的工作条件，以及其他状况并不是非常当代的。如果我们接受经济关系是任何社会干预/对话中重要的一部分这一事实，那么他们所呈现的当代艺术与当代经济并没有太多关系。如果从好或是坏的角度来看，今天，在自由市场中，人们通过参与经济而获得更多的存在感，通过经济的变化而产生社会变化；但这些变化并非来自艺术，也许甚至不是在美学上。也许只有当艺术被用来改变城市的感知时，它才更复杂。今年（2007年）是毕尔巴鄂古根汉博物馆成立十周年，很有趣的是古根汉在毕尔巴鄂的第一个餐会是在这座城市由趣味项目工作的Bilbao，由于古根汉在毕尔巴鄂的扩张，该市和巴斯克国家的形象有所改变，但不能说它的内容产生了任何变化，因为没有一件在博物馆展出的艺术作品产生了任何改变，或者更准确地说，这不是艺术作品带来了毕尔巴鄂国际形象的转变。在这种等级上，艺术的使用或应用，已经产生了具有巨大经济影响的变化；但这些变化并非来自博物馆的内容，也没有任何艺术作品代表的艺术家在古根汉、文特纳，或在斯库尔特鲁普投贝格斯蒙斯特的威尼斯双年展中产生任何变化。

Ixiar: 就这来说，你可以说社会从艺术中获取它感兴趣的事，通过使一些具有‘旅游’或‘文化’价值的事物吗？

Asier: 我认为他们将一些事物从一个艺术领域变成一个金融领域：无论是由一个公共或私人机构资助的项目，它都是生产文化消费的一部分。但它不产生任何更好文化知识，也不产生任何基于艺术的社会运动。它只涉及艺术的风格化和艺术带动的旅游。

Ixiar: 趣味项目对‘古根汉效应’有什么看法？

Asier: 有一件重要的事情可以谈论，那就是巴斯克国家最著名的品牌是ETA。古根汉是试图通过现代艺术改变巴斯克国家形象的一部分，它试图用某种方式覆盖巴斯克国家。

Ixiar: 在过去的几年中，趣味项目是否按你预期的那样发展？

Asier: 显然，它在很多方面都有发展。一方面，整个工作流程，获取客户，制定工作系统......等。我没有料到这会如此‘沉重’。这很困难，既在思想上，也在经济上，现在我们正结束一个非常重要的战略反思时期，我们正在非常雄心勃勃地考虑未来，以知识和我们生成的物体为基础，我们认为我们可以提供更有趣和更复杂的服务。

Ixiar: 你能谈谈你认为对业务发展有重要意义的项目吗？
Asier: ShowBar is a project we are preparing with Park & Ride in Manchester, UK. It is a complete project in that if we are capable of getting it up and running properly, it will, in its first phase, be very explosive, very spectacular; we also anticipate criticism from 'outside' because of its experimental nature. It will try to be a 'pop up' in the logic of identity creation by consumption of global brands in the Northern Quarter of the city, in order to generate 'a point of encounter' in an area where they are establishing creative industries. I think that another important project that we are working on is one concerning housing for young people in Basauri (a town on the edge of metropolitan Bilbao). In Spain housing is more than a problem; it is extremely expensive, and this has produced a situation of housing inaccessibility, in a country where the tradition has always been to purchase your own home. On top of that, the project, which entails the construction of 35 dwellings, is an exercise in social pedagogy, seeking to change living habits and to promote a logic of use rather than ownership. Our collaboration with the architect Santiago Cirujeda will eventuate in the construction of 35 dwellings, but what interests us is the community of young people that can come and make use of these places over time, and the capacity of this community in movement to generate participatory projects and change the area that they live in.

Ixiar: How does Funky Projects approach its work, each project and day by day?

Asier: We have a lot of difficulties finding and contracting the right people. We are always looking for people with a very creative attitude and with the attitude and capacity to work in a team. These are not the 'logics' of working in art, where you can be more of an egoist and selfish. The clients assure us that with a lot less than we deliver, they would still be satisfied. But we think that we have to challenge our clients, without losing them, which would be possible; we have to try and generate as much knowledge for our clients as well as for all the other stakeholders in the project, and for ourselves. Never have we had to adapt ourselves in a way that might imply lowering our standards to meet those of the client. Projects are never initially designed as 'complete'; there is always a framework, but this simply marks the way in which we go via various strategies. Along the way we have to maneuver, manage, drive, both human resources as much as economic ones; you always seem to discover things are not quite as we had imagined in the first place. So it is this process which takes us along – both for us and for the clients; this need to be very creative during the whole process, in working through its implementation, and not only in a project's conception.

Ixiar: Are there any possible new ways that Funky Projects could produce knowledge?

Asier: We have just produced a framework based upon three axes. One one axis there are the services that we provide our clients: here we are like a consultancy -- strategic creativity advisors involved in the ideation of experience. Another axis is in the logics of dissemination through publications, like the book we put out a couple of years ago, El verdadero historia de Kalimotxo (The True History of Kalimotxo*). We want to publish things outside of conferences and 'research', things that are not 'academic', with which we try to maximise the socialization of the projects so that they become both economically and socially sustainable. The third axis is the systemization of work projects. The most developed example we have is Karma Cream, a system to translate corporate identities to ice cream flavours. We are going to start working more in this area of systems logic in the coming months to offer our clients specific rapid implementation systems. Then the client will be able to understand very easily some of the things that we do, and from these systems we believe that we can commercialize other types of more complicated services. Within this area we are starting to give experiential creativity workshops. There actually exists a horrible tendency on the edges of creative methodologies: it is a 'super fashion', where every business and arm of government talks about creativity and innovation. Nearly all of these businesses put into operation methods that are tried and tested; we are not part of this. We are anti methodological philosophical thinking (Paul Feyerabend). We have had to meet the different demands of clients and now we are about to start preparing two experiential creativity workshops. One is for a university business faculty and the other is within a cultural heritage congress, where they will be bringing together cultural heritage management issues; we are going to put on for them a experiential creativity workshop.

Ixiar: You also have an idea to make a type of workshop involving casting and contracts?

Asier: Yes, maybe it is a situation similar to that of the experiential creativity workshops, but it comes more from a logic in which all business give their employees training once they are contracted. What we want to try and do is give this training to a large group and make choices, nearly like the way the logics of the UK TV's Big Brother operate, the logic of competitive television, to choose people who potentially could work within Funky Projects. It will be like a proper selection and training process, fun, enthusiastic, proactive and creative.

Ixiar: Earlier, you expressed some criticism of the art world, but you have clients who work in this world. Can you tell me about an example of this?

Asier: Smart Project Space is a client in Amsterdam for whom we develop a lot of very ambitious creative strategic projects. Smart Project Space is an Amsterdam foundation that recently moved to a new building. One of the things we have designed for them is a concept of the functioning of the spaces outside of expositions. We have created a concept of space that can be consumed by any person, so that they have a fun and enriched experience in any of the services space. We have worked with the orientation of their
publishing and editorial work, developing the user experience of the full range of Smart Project Space services activities. We have worked a lot on the restaurant concept, maybe because we have a special interest in food and people services, also because the Smart Project Space restaurant is one of their own revenue sources. The system that we have proposed is a residence that accommodates two high quality chefs each year, in a way in which they could develop their own project over the six months of their residency. It started out as a way of not simply falling into the idea of working on the ‘interior design’ of the space, but generating the attention of consumers through the media, and through the ‘experience’. That way we will have a restaurant that will change twice a year in all of its concepts of cooking, and in that way will enrich the clients, as well as the chefs in residence, and all the other personnel that work in the kitchen. Another part of the proposal that we have put together is to mount a few modules on the flat roof of the building, and they will be very special hotel rooms, special because of their experimental architecture, their location, and their very nice views of Amsterdam.

Ixiar: What interested you to give this turn and get involved in these things? Is the final intention to change pre-existing conceptions?

Asier: The vocation of Funky Projects is always to be progressive, starting with the logics of creativity and social innovation. This progressivism makes us try and change pre-existing ideas, very established ideas like cultural habits, the way people relate to each other, the times and shape of consumption, and the time to enjoy different moments of life. Thus our vocation is to enrich all the project stakeholders that we work with, from the starting point of enjoyment practices and knowledge through reflection in action. But to consolidate is not necessarily the same as to improve. In producing a qualitative jump, and by looking for approximate situations within other, different, fields, we seek to produce in these experiences a cultural sophistication of the surroundings in which we put on each project.

+ Translated by Martin Hardie.
* Kalimotxo - a popular Basque drink consisting of a mix of cheap red wine and coca cola.
COMING SOON

THE FOURTH ART OF MANAGEMENT AND ORGANIZATION CONFERENCE
Workplace Projects began when designer Trevor James met J. Paul O’Keefe, founder and Managing Director of The Projects Company in Reading, UK (now one company of The Projects Group). The Projects Company had already carved out a niche as designer and fitter of high-end commercial interiors, providing blue-chip clients like GlaxoSmithKline with state-of-the-art high-tech office space. James has extended the original Projects vision, providing integrated solutions in a way few designers are intellectually equipped to do.

James is sometimes frustrated at the way even hugely successful companies do not think in terms of spatial strategy – in terms of the interrelated ways in which they use the limited space they have to work. At least, they do not think of it until they move premises, in which case they call in the designer at the last stage when they move premises, in which case they call in the designer at the last stage when every other consideration has been made in maintaining business productivity. James, however, excels in re-thinking the entire space and the way in which it is used and developed, how it facilitates basic human needs as well as the outer realms of innovative productivity. This task entails the designer analyzing the space first hand – as if conducting an ethnographic study – observing how people use their environment, their work tools, how they interact, walk around, sit on their chairs, use their desks or laptops, have meetings, spend time thinking, or relaxing, drinking coffee, or negotiating. The language and behaviour of space-use is under scrutiny and design problems quickly begin to present themselves.

The manifold tasks conducted through any one working day in a business environment are actually inhibited by an environment full of detached objects and tools, all of which are standardised and rationalised, often inhuman and impersonal. Bespoke ‘designer’ office furniture is one such response to this common situation, however this offers no sustainable answer for large dynamic companies, given staff movement or turnover, team work, and the costs it would incur. What is needed is an integrated spatial approach, where the form of the organizational space is developed from within the kinds of activity undertaken within it, flexible and intelligent enough to be able to be adapted to multiple forms of usage. Most of all, however, the standardized and rationalised environments of corporate life have emerged not from an advanced understanding of human productivity, but an impoverished understanding of it, involving deeply engrained conceptions of ‘people’ as corporate tools, not self-determining individuals.

James is no idealist, but begins with the hard economics of a company’s needs – the finance and statistical facts of business demands. Neither is he a visionary artist-designer, protective of his inventions – ‘I just continue throwing ideas at the client, and see what sticks’. Like the lineage of constructivist designers before him, he is concerned to integrate the outer realms of aesthetics with the hard technical demand for productive facilities. James is probably most distinguished for his product engineering – developing new kinds of ‘people’ as corporate tools, not self-involving deeply engrained conceptions of business demands. Neither is he a visionary artist-designer, protective of his inventions – ‘I just continue throwing ideas at the client, and see what sticks’. Like the lineage of constructivist designers before him, he is concerned to integrate the outer realms of aesthetics with the hard technical demand for productive facilities. 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