

Two Scripts

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I never asked for a creative mind. It just came with the package.

And when I had to use it to figure out how to make a living, the business of being a photographer in advertising and communications seemed perfect. By then I was photographing anyway. If they'd pay me to do it, fine.

So I began to put my creativity and intuitiveness at the service of the world of business, making images that would help fulfill the projections, analyses and hopes of my clients. Much of the time this arrangement has worked smoothly, but sometimes vague abrasive incidents seem to arise like bubbles from within the process itself. And because I want to understand how creativity works in all kinds of circumstances, I think about these edgy events quite a bit.

Why is it that artists and business people working toward the same end get into and difficulties with each other at all? (By artists I mean, in this case, people in the creative professions--designers, art directors, illustrators, photographers, writers...us! By business people I mean our clients.)

There is an explanation, and when I saw it demonstrated, it was as though a key were sliding into a lock. Pins dropped into place one after another. A door to understanding opened.

I came across the answer while reading a piece by the writer Sol Stein about an improvisation exercise that was used in classes at Actor's Studio. Here's the way the it works. A director sets up a somewhat defined situation within which two actors, a man and a woman, can develop the specifics and make the entire scene real. He takes the man aside and tells him, "You are meeting with this woman. Your immediate objective for this scene is to convince her that you got her message. And incidentally, she is rather taken with you."

Then he walks over and whispers to the other actor, the woman, "This man you're meeting is rather obnoxious, and he owes you money. What I want you to play is, "Where's the money? He owes you, you want it and that's it."

Now, the idea in such improvisations is for the actor to take a simple starting point, commit to the situation, and bring all of his own experience and feeling to the work of making it convincing to the audience. The more he commits to the situation and concentrates on it, the more it will come alive.

So there you have the set up. The rest of the class watches as the two actors approach each other and meet at center stage. The man calls out enthusiastically, even warmly, "There you are! Listen, I got your message."

"That's good," says the woman. No greeting, no enthusiasm, right to her point. "Where's the money?"

And bang, there's a conflict under way, just like that. Each actor sticks to the attitude he's been given to play. They hear each other well enough, they even respond, but each returns to his objective and sticks to it. The annoyance grows, the conflict escalates, the tensions crackle. There is drama!

Why? Because, as the director explains after the scene, dramatic tension arises when people who are sure they're talking about the same thing are usually not, not quite. It is as though they were on the same with scripts that are slightly--or very--different. Polonius plays the wit and liveliness of a Noel Coward character and it is awkward and foolish because Hamlet is playing...Hamlet.

This doesn't come from Art, of course, it is found in life and reflected in Art. For years, ever since I decided I would earn my living commercially, I have found moments of difference cropping up with clients as we worked. This made no sense. We were all there, after all, to produce a work that would sell the client's product or service. But sometimes I'd have different ideas on how to go about it. I would want to take an image in a new direction and the client would want to do just what we'd said we'd do. Or the client would want to do a picture that I thought borrowed too much from another image he'd seen, while I wanted to do something more germane to his scenario. Or there might be any of a number of other disconnects.

When I heard about the Actor's Studio exercise the reason for the little abrasions became clear. The problem came from different understandings of the same situation. It was built into the foundation of what we were doing, and it would always be there.

Artists and businessmen play from different scripts. They are in slightly different plays with slightly different endings. And most of them have no clue at all that the other person has a very different reason for doing what he does, built into him, I suspect, since birth.

Now are things a little clearer?
They were for me, and the demonstration of how the problem worked has helped me deal with these things before they go too far wrong.

To be sure, it seems like artists and business people are in the same play. Both want to do a good job and get a good result. The difference lies in their ideas of what constitutes a "good job" and the reasons they want to do it.

Take the business man. I have a client who has a very successful business. He is savvy and entrepreneurial, also educated--MBA and all that. He's worked extensively in advertising and is now in mail order. He understands merchandising and marketing very well.

During the course of our relationship his designer and I have spent considerable time working on his projects. Naturally we keep wanting to try new approaches. And while the client professes to be willing to try something new, he doesn't really trust what he hasn't seen work. So he frequently reins us in at the last minute. Or he wants to hedge by executing in both new and old ways.

Overall, his objective in his business is to find products to offer, buy them at the lowest price he can, produce his offering (a catalogue in this case), have the designer make the book inviting, have me photograph the objects attractively, then find a price point that is as much above his cost for all this as he can get it. He has to find just the point before people say, "Nah, too much."

So he's playing with an equation. When the differential is correct and he makes a profit, he is satisfied. Each little thing that he can do to get costs down--less expensive paper, more density on the page, cheaper manufacturing of product--and get the price up extends the differential. This whittling and shaping of merchandise and presentation is what he does, it's his work, his form. As the differential increases, he becomes happier. It's visceral.

I think this visceral satisfaction is a big part of what moves businessmen. It's a feeling, and it must be a lot like the one that a scientist gets when an elegant solution carries him over an impasse, or that fills the heart of an artist when the separate energies of color and line add up the an energy that is larger than either. And when it's put this way, most creatives at least understand it. They may feel a little something of this sense of rightness when they price their own work. But it's not quite the same gut response.

Artists do get same feeling in their gut, but they get it in an entirely different way, even if they are working to a commercial purpose. What makes them feel alive and worthy is something different than profit, and it drives them just as strongly.

Rather than describe what it is, I want to show you.

I got a call about a year ago from someone at a design firm who had seen some personal work of mine, a series of still lifes. She wanted me to create some more in a similar vein to use in a brochure for a landscape architect. I was pleased that this strong work I'd done from my own impulses might find such a use. I even convinced the designer to let me do the garden photos that would run opposite the still lifes.

This was great, a project that grew out of my own artistic work, that gave me the chance to do landscapes, a designer who was giving me the freedom to dream up the imagery, subject matter that was beautiful to begin with (I didn't have to make things look better than they were, for a change). And on top of all that I'd be paid to do it. There wasn't endless money, but I knew it could be one of the nicest projects, commercial or not, that I'd ever done, so we came up with a budget that was fair, if not munificent. I'm sure that for the landscape architect it was more than he thought he'd ever spend on promotion.

I began in the studio on the still lifes, and almost at once I did something unbusinesslike. I used some expensive props I'd already bought but didn't charge anything to the project. There was value for the client in their use and some cost should have been figured in, but I knew the budget wouldn't bear it. Still, the props were just what was needed. Oh well, big deal.

Then I made an even worse business decision. I looked at a print I was about to mail off to the designer, and I suddenly saw something I could have done to make it better. Doing the shot had revealed a further, deeper possibility. So I set the whole thing up and shot again.

The budget was set and agreed upon, so I knew I couldn't charge for the second shoot, but I knew that if I hadn't shot it again I'd have looked at the finished piece and always known that it could have been better.

This was the point at which the artist in me asserted itself and overruled my business instincts. It was the exact point of balance. The whole project tipped over toward artistic exploration and was never businesslike again.

Here's the point. If the businessman's satisfaction comes from increasing his cost/price differential and all that follows from it, satisfaction for the artist, even the commercial artist, lies in doing something as well, as beautifully as it can be done. Cost can be a worry, time can be a concern, but these things don't stop me from doing what I have to do to make the final result stunning. In the end I want to stand before the world in joyful silence with this perfectly crafted expression in my hands while people say, "How beautiful...how perfectly expressive...how moving!"

It's kind of a dopey image, but it's true. Perhaps someone will say, "How much did that cost"? It's a point, but it's not the point.

Well, my project went on. I flew South to photograph the gardens. The landscape architect met me and took me around to his garden projects, and they were just stunning--rich, various, inventive, serene. We covered five gardens in two days, sometimes chasing the light frantically, sometimes waiting still for it to be just right. It was exhilarating.

I had already done all the still lifes we'd need, but when I got back and saw my garden film, several new images suggested themselves to me. For example, I had brought back a picture of a beautiful stone staircase with plants weeping over its edges, all bathed in the light of evening, so I did a new still life of a hand holding a polygonal stone to run opposite it. Doing the new still life meant I had to switch out an earlier photo, but the juxtaposition was so perfect that there was no real choice. The extra work would erode my differential further. But the artist won.

In the end I shot 20 still lifes to get the nine that ran. I was the one who pushed on, improving and exploring. When I got stuck the designer would give me some terrific input and suggestions. Her enthusiasm was as great as mine. I spent time and money,

knowing that it was my time and my money. That didn't really matter to me. At a certain point I stopped worrying and told myself that this would be a beautiful piece, and that was all this project had to be. In the end, I felt a deeper and deeper satisfaction.

The piece has just been printed. When the first press sheets arrived I just held them in my hands and let the glow spread. Only five hundred copies were printed. Perhaps a few thousand people at most will ever sit quietly with it and see it in its entirety, the way it was meant to be seen. The essayist George Trow pointed out that, in our media culture, when ten million people see something it begins--just begins--to be considerable. So this book won't even appear on the cultural radar. But the chance to work on it has been something rare, a chance to do something as well as one can do it.

And everyone who has worked on it feels the same way. The people at the design firm have given it time and attention that can never be compensated. I don't know for sure, but I suspect that everyone who worked on the piece throughout ignored the bottom line just to do it as it should have been done.

Now, I'm sure my businessman client, the catalogue owner, would understand my happiness, but the way that I got happy would make little sense to him. Here I was spending time, not hours but days and days, and I could never bill it or get it back. How could I make it up?

Well, really it wasn't all that hard. Other projects came in, things that weren't so entrancing. I did them, did them well, on time and on budget and to everyone's satisfaction, including my own, and I was paid. So it's not as though I was setting other assignments aside to do the garden book. I just worked on it on weekends. I was cutting down the differential and doing it willingly, and if I wasn't making it up completely elsewhere, at least I was cutting my losses. I am, after all, still in business after all these years.

So the best explanation I can make for my behavior is that the businessman and I are appearing in the same play for different reasons and are acting out different scripts. We're playing them with deep conviction. Because I have such conviction I sometimes get exasperated that others won't do what my script indicates they should. I want to bang heads just to help clear their minds so they'll see what I see. The fact that good work, mutual respect and profit often come of this process seems nearly a miracle.

The conflict that arises from this opposition has been eased somewhat since I had its workings demonstrated to me by the Actor's Studio exercise. When someone says something that is different than what I'd mean if I said it, I think, "Two scripts!" It lets me understand what is driving the other person. If I can understand that their motivation is different and see what it is, I can at least find a way to talk with them.

Take the word creative. When an artist--a painter or writer or composer, what I think of as real artists--sets out to do something creative, he or she seeks to discover something and let it manifest. It may take time, and it may refer to what is familiar, but its power

comes from the fact that it has at its center something seen in a new way that makes it clearer.

But I find that when my clients say, "Let's do something creative," they at once pull out examples of other work, "creative" work. It's like watching a bunch of paralegals at a law firm digging through the books looking for precedent in past cases. They find something they like and then depart from that, sometimes transcending it, sometimes just tricking it up in new clothes, but starting with a past execution. The reason is simple: they have to be sure as they can that an approach might work.

The reason for taking a creative approach in the commercial world is to catch jaded eyes with a fresh treatment, but business wants the assurance of precedent at the same time. One result is that visual effects have a way of becoming "looks." A few years ago shadows started to creep into commercial photographs, offering a hint of mystery, of otherness. Perhaps they implied something unknown, something larger, taking place beyond the frame.

Quickly it became a look. A wily old-line rep said to me, "Ya notice all those shadows everywhere now? Y'ever wonder where those shadows are coming from? They didn't usta be there." Well, they came from the same place that all those floating clock faces come from, or those swooshing delivery men, or glowing computers and floating globes, or those selective focus moves that point strongly to something that turns out to be nothing much. (As Spike Milligan once said, "LOOK!....A direction.")

It's a whole stock pot filled with things that look as though they probably might mean something, and our business draws on it constantly to make soup.

By contrast, Art, the real thing, seeks to express things that really mean something but that are ineffable, that can't really be expressed any other way. Its process starts without a clear goal, and when it gets to the end of its journey, one just knows it. It doesn't state its premise, it reveals it, and not just to the audience but to the artist too. Think of William Carlos Williams.

So much depends upon
a red wheelbarrow,
glazed with rain
standing beside a white chicken.

(We all know someone who'd say, "Let's cover it with a red wagon too, just in case.") So, unlike art, commercial communications starts with a given that must be expressed. It's a huge difference. Sometimes it's even a relief to have limits. I was working on a self-assigned project recently in which I wanted to explore how the visual rhythm of trees made an effect like music. I spent weeks in the woods of New England and the West coast with no idea of exactly what I was looking for. I could only go out and hope that when the light was right I'd be someplace where this effect might manifest and that I'd recognize it was happening. I'd call my wife late at night from some woodsy motel after I had come in from shooting and express my anxiety over whether I was getting anything.

And I kept thinking, I wish someone had just said, "A single gnarled cypress, ocean in the background, nice light. Has to say strength, integrity." An assignment, a clear objective. Precedent! It would have been so much easier. But in the end it would have lacked the resonance and contradiction that difficulty and grit bring to art.

It would be a mistake to think that artists and business people necessarily oppose each other, but they are different, and that becomes obvious when they're playing out on the same stage. We face this in dealing with our clients and have to do some pretty smart reconciling to get things done. And so do they. It must be frustrating for them too.

And it's the process of reconciling that often leads to the best commercial work. The business people on the job determine the goal and keep things on point, the artists explore complexity around what seem to be a simple goal. At its absolute best, each player gives up a little space for the other's point of view, and it can lead to stunning results.

For example, at a photo shoot a few years ago a number of models were seated at a table in a modern, loft-like setting. Their work was to look young and trendy (and, I think, to smoke.) Suddenly a young man with a towel around his waist and nothing else wandered through the back of the set. The photographer caught it. I don't know why the man was there, but he was definitely not part of the shoot plan. The models reacted hilariously, the artist had the sense to grab it, and the client had the wisdom to run the result. The moment was alive, even though it had nothing to do with what they'd set out to do.

For the sake of this discussion I have set the poles of art and commerce further apart than they necessarily are. Of course people with an artistic basis concern themselves with costs and process and outcomes. And of course business people make intuitive leaps that can lead to great results and satisfaction.

And of course the need to reconcile creative adventuring with reliable outcome can precipitate solutions that transcend the best hopes of both sides. That's where the fun of our business lies.

But it doesn't work when one mentality scorns the other. Then the real opportunity for creative symbiosis can be lost. I heard a colleague, a photographer-turned-businessman, say that it was time for photographers to grow up and become businessmen. Becoming businessmen (or at least more businesslike) would be OK, but "grow up"? Really!

Respect also has to work in the other direction. A client tells us what he wants, and he has a right to get just that. Imagine going to a restaurant and ordering roast beef, and having the waiter say, "Look, I brought you something much better, goat cheese pizza with watercress chutney! You'll love it!" And insisting, and sulking when you continue to want what you want.

Still, there has to be a way for the group working on a project to get to a strong image, one with some texture and rasp that can actually catch and hold attention more fully than

one that is so smooth that the mind just slides over it. I've had clients look at an idea and say, "People won't understand that." But if people get a little bit snagged and intrigued by something that doesn't reveal itself entirely at first they will be more likely to engage it. All the great campaigns seem to have that aspect to them. When its not, the result is eye candy.

So the different points of view on a team need to abrade each other a bit, and to find a way to do it respectfully. A psychologist, Dr. Geil Browning, who runs a seminar on harmonizing left- and right-brained people in work settings, did a study of business organizations which showed that groups made up of like-minded people tended to decline because they didn't accommodate people who would tell them things they didn't like but needed to know. The most effective businesses combined creative and analytical people. And, very interestingly, the most effective people in these businesses, the CEO's, tended to combine the creative and the analytical within themselves.

I know that the disconnect between the artistic and the business mentality is not news to anyone who is likely to be reading this magazine. But the next time you are annoyed by it, try just thinking to yourself, "Different scripts!" Don't say it out loud. Try not to laugh. And see if knowing this lets you resolve the situation more easily.

- Sean Kernan