

How much entrepreneurial spirit can or should be found in an artist?

As artists, you inspire people all over the world. In Cologne, you are no longer a secret tip in the art scene. You work with unusual materials, produce your own colours, or in short: nothing here is off the peg! But with your own gallery, you are also entrepreneurs. How much of an entrepreneur can, or should, an artist be? And how is the price for such a work of art calculated? Iven Orx & Aaron Vinn give the answers in a personal interview and also report about the multi-million dollar machinery of the worldwide art scene, which is now often more about money than about the art itself.



business-on.de: Who is your target group?

Iven Orx: Our target group is people who want to experience art in a different way. That can be anyone. They are doctors, entrepreneurs, teachers, they are just normal people. We also have two customers who are priests. So it's all over the place. I think it's not about where you come from, but how you want to feel and feel about art. So there are also art collectors and investors who buy art and expect it to increase in value.

business-on.de: As a company, it is important to have a unique selling point to distinguish yourself from competitors. What distinguishes you from other artists?

Iven Orx: We use very different materials that are not so well known. Like gold leaf, for example. That was used in the Middle Ages for icons and icon painting, but less for art. Glitter is also a material that is used more for Christmas articles than for works of art. Then there are the abstract paintings we do. We paint these with colours that we mix and make ourselves. Our colours have more depth and better pigmentation. The quality and our ideas make us different. And we ourselves are also special. Our life simply ... If you want to own a piece of us and you buy it, you also buy our story, a piece of the artist himself. From experience we can say that our customers are very interested in us and our art. How we came to be, etc. They watch very closely how we develop.

business-on.de: Speaking of watching: How is it with the competitors? Germany in particular is a country of certificates and proof of quality. How did your competitors deal with the fact that you didn't study art, but simply went into the market on gut instinct?

Iven Orx: Yes, that's just the way it is. There are two ways. There have always been, even in the Middle Ages. There is the academic path, where you can go to an art academy and learn to be an artist. But we

have found that we don't want to become artists, but that we already are. And that was the case from the beginning. That's why we chose the somewhat more difficult path of making art out of ourselves and not first coming to art through professors and formulas. But that is also the special thing about not submitting to a style. And that we cannot be categorised or "pigeonholed". We are not associated with a certain pigeonhole or a certain person, but with something that is not stereotypical. We had a mentor in whose mind we did many exhibitions. That's Mary Bauermeister, that's the avant-garde of the sixties. She taught us a lot about art. She is very much represented in the biggest and most important museums in the world. And she always said to us: "Boys, stay the way you are! Don't be constricted by a school or an academy." She herself did the same. She started studying, but dropped out after a few months because she realised that she could get much further with her artistic talent alone. And so we are following in the footsteps of the old masters who gave free rein to their creative spirit.

business-on.de: The paradise for artists is actually New York. The greatest galleries and museums are there. You are in Cologne. How does it feel to be an artist in Cologne?

Iven Orx: Super! (laughs) Paradise is where a person's heart is, I think. And our heart beats for Cologne and for what we do. With our gallery, which we have been running for twelve years, we have created this freedom to be independent of the big global players, like the big galleries in New York, and to be able to realise ourselves. We don't have to follow anyone, we don't have to submit to trends and we don't have to be inspired by other artists. Because our inspiration is ourselves through our hearts. So we are very happy that we don't have to give in to this general thinking that you have to be where the great art happens and where others decide what art is or how good it is. We decide for ourselves what art is, and I think we're doing quite well so far.

business-on.de: As an artist, you are also an entrepreneur. This means that you are also responsible for accounting, finances, etc. How do you manage the balancing act between your creativity as an artist and the entrepreneurial requirements with numbers, data, facts?

Iven Orx: First of all, we have a very good tax consultant who does almost everything for us. And we also know a very good gallery owner who always gives us tips on how to be competitive on the art market. So there are very good people in our environment who mean well with us and who help us to successfully tread the entrepreneurial path. Everything else is “learning by doing”. The first years were very difficult for us because we jumped into bigger waters with the gallery. In the very beginning, there were months when we lived from a sack of rice from the Indian shop around the corner so that we had the money to pay the rent. It’s not like we had tens of customers from the beginning and that everyone knew about us. But over time we learnt to run the business well and profitably. To do good advertising. Because we continue to develop, visit trade fairs and make new contacts with people from the art scene, we have become an institution in Cologne.

business-on.de: Is networking an important pillar for successful business?

Iven Orx: Yes, I think the most important thing for an entrepreneur is to have a network.

business-on.de: What investments are necessary to be successful as an artist?

Iven Orx: Well, I think the most important investment is time. You learn to paint by painting – so they say. And if you want to become a successful artist, you have to do something, and you have to do it with total commitment. For example, we don’t take any holidays, we don’t go anywhere, we are artists and entrepreneurs day and night. And if you want to do something well, you have to do it all the way. There is

no working time. It's not like we start being entrepreneurs at 9 o'clock and show up at the office. We are constantly and permanently thinking about all factors. There is no separation.

Aaron Vinn: But you also have to say that you do have to switch. Because when you're creative, you think differently than when you think business-like. You can notice that. It's not that one person's left brain goes on and the right brain goes off. But you do realise that you have to act differently.

Iven Orx: As an artist, you would love to give art to the world. But as an entrepreneur, you always have to remember that you have your fixed costs per month. The gallery has to be paid, the electricity bill, the Google advertising ... And that all adds up to many thousands of euros. Then there are employees who help us build frames. Then we have the delivery of the paintings. For that we have a van to deliver our paintings around here. It's all the entrepreneur in us who always says, "At the end of the month, you have to live off what you make and pay the bills." You can never forget that. And that is indeed a balancing act.

business-on.de: How is the price for a work of art calculated?

Iven Orx: We calculate according to a very well-known formula. We calculate width + height, multiplied by the so-called artist factor. The artist factor results from the fact that the beginners ... So there is a scale of points from 1 to "open end" and beginners achieve a scale of points from 1-10. That gives the artist factor. Because we are a so-called producer gallery, i.e. you buy art from us without an intermediary, without a gallery owner, who usually charges another 50 % surcharge, you get art from us at a somewhat lower price. That's how we calculate the price – and compared to the overall market for art, it's still affordable. And we want it to stay that way. That's why we don't have an external gallery owner, but run the gallery ourselves.

business-on.de: How does the German art market differ from that of other countries?

Iven Orx: I think the internet has liberalised the art market a lot. The mechanisms are now the same everywhere in the Western world. In New York, things are perhaps a bit flashier and more elaborate than here in Cologne. We still have affordable art. Then there are the art speculators. These are the “blue chips” with the ten most expensive artists in the world. But there is real speculation and prices are set according to whim and fancy. That no longer has anything to do with a gallery that covers its costs, but much more with speculation.

business-on.de: Who sets the trends in the art scene? Are there so-called trendsetters, like in the fashion industry?

Iven Orx: Yes, but they are made by these speculators. There are works like the one by Jeff Koons, which are auctioned off for 91 million dollars.

business-on.de: Let's stay with the figure by Jeff Koons that was recently auctioned off for 91 million dollars. How do such prices come about?

Aaron Vinn: There is a huge machinery behind it, investing time and energy to push an artist like that and increase the market price. That is simply the basic task of speculators and gallery owners. After all, art is something that no one needs. Art is something that gives pleasure and is an investment at the same time. With the great artists known all over the world, such as Warhol, Koons or Lichtenstein, this machinery makes the price go higher and higher. That is, as I said, the basic task of this system.

Iven Orx: But it's all about money and not about the art itself or what it represents – that it gives pleasure. People buy it because it's expensive.

Aaron Vinn: Even the rabbit I just mentioned (Jeff Koons “Rabbit”) has been seen a million times, because it keeps copying itself.

business-on.de: As you just said, art has become an investment object. Does that change the character of art?

Iven Orx: I think our world is shaped in such a way that you can no longer exclude the money factor. Whether it is about health or food, clothes or a car – money plays a role in all these things, and it is the same with art. The difference is only the question of whether I acquire a work of art as a speculative object in order to earn money with it, or as a work of art that gives me real pleasure and that has a certain value. The value in this case, however, is not calculated according to speculation because someone demands it, but according to how good the artist is, how committed. This is then called the productivity of the artist. How productive is the artist? Does he stick to it or does he just do it on the side as a hobby? Does he do it at home or does he have a professional studio? Does he have a gallery that represents him or does he have his own gallery like we do? These are all factors that are important if you don't just calculate the ideal value.

Our paintings and works of art cost already a bit of money in the meantime, almost a few thousand euros. And you don't want to throw that away, all that money. When I think about it – at the very beginning we sold paintings for 200 dollars, now they cost 2,000-3,000€. That's already a good increase in value within 10-12 years.

business-on.de: How does that make you feel as an artist? Are you proud of such an increase in value or are you more worried that the ideal value will be lost and that your art will become too commercial?

Aaron Vinn: I don't see it as commercial. I think we are doing it right.

Iven Orx: Yes, and you're also happy for the people who see that the two of us are still around, after more than 10 years, and that we've evolved. They see that we now have a gallery, that the artworks are

more expensive. And yes, we did everything right. Now that was the entrepreneur in me just speaking.

business-on.de: And what does the artist in you say?

Iven Orx: The artist would say, “I don’t care.” And yes, I really don’t care about the value.

Aaron Vinn: We as artists have such a connection to our works, it comes from the heart, you can’t represent that in money at all.

Iven Orx: We got a WhatsApp message from a gallery owner from Italy recently. He bought paintings in the time period from our beginnings and now he has sent us two photos of these paintings. They are hanging in his house. He didn’t sell them, but framed them beautifully and kept them for himself. We were really proud of that. He is our fan for many years now. It fills us with pride that even someone who lives from the art trade keeps our works of art because he likes them.



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business-on.de: Goods usually have a functional purpose. Art doesn't have that. Why do you think people still spend a lot of money on art?

Aaron Vinn: The motivation is probably different. Some may want to represent individuality or reflect their own character in their home or office.

Iven Orx: At high quality art, it's all about quality. High-quality art that is professionally made has to cost some money. Costs that are incurred in the production and in everything you do ... So that you can already recognise the quality factor through the price. The speculative is excluded. When I look at our materials, for example, it always costs an immeasurable amount of money what we order in gold leaf, paints, wood and fabrics. It's all high quality. Because we want the works of art to retain their shape for decades or perhaps even centuries and the colours to remain colourfast. That we leave something behind for posterity. Yes, and that is reflected in the price, because you can't produce this quality for 100 €.

Aaron Vinn: That's not even enough for a canvas.

business-on.de: Are there circumstances that change the price?

Iven Orx: Yes, there are. For example, we have a producer's gallery. This means that our prices do not include the gallery price surcharge. And that can be up to 50 %. If we were deciding now to take a gallery owner, because we would rather put the time into producing the artworks, then the price would change for us. The prices would increase because the gallery owner would have to charge up to 50 % more for his work, since he also has costs and commitments. He is represented at art fairs, etc.

business-on.de: Does a gallery owner also take care of marketing and promotion?

Iven Orx: Yes, he also does the marketing.

Aaron Vinn: You can roughly distinguish between an art dealer who offers various works of art and the gallery owner who is passionately committed to his artists.

business-on.de: What do you recommend to people who want to invest their money in art? What should they collect, what should they consider?

Iven Orx: If you don't choose the "blue chips" (the 10 most expensive artists in the world), and instead stay within the affordable range that we operate in, we recommend that people really buy art that they love. Because you live with the art. The artwork becomes a part of your life. You come home, sit down in your living room and see a beautiful painting or wall object. You have to feel comfortable with it. And you should make sure that the artwork comes from a professional artist who really works full-time and who really lives for what he does and has learned his business. With this purchase, the painting does not lose value, but rather increases in value over time. And that's a good thing, if you invest materially in value. But primarily you should really like a work of art. You should buy what touches your heart.

business-on.de: What entrepreneurial risks do you have as an artist?

Aaron Vinn: The only risk would be if one of us were not able to work, because of illness or something.

Iven Orx: We share the areas. Everyone has their own tasks and if one of us falls ill, that would be a problem. Because we also run the gallery and have obligations in relation to the company, such as responsibility for the employees, etc.

Aaron Vinn: But as an entrepreneur you don't get sick. We just don't do that.

business-on.de: How do you promote yourselves today?

Iven Orx: The main vein of marketing for us is word of mouth. We have this gallery here for twelve years now and people are talking about it. They say Cologne is like a village. One person tells another that he has bought a great work of art or that he knows great artists who have a gallery. There's a lot of talk about that. And of course Google ads. We're also very easy to find on Google.

Aaron Vinn: Maybe another special thing about us. In contrast to many galleries, where you go in and often don't know where you are, we are transparent. With us, you can also buy everything online. For us, "transparent" also means that we don't determine the prices on a presumptive basis, but in a serious way. In other words, we have price transparency. And we have this mixed form: online business with a gallery.

That makes us very contemporary. Many buyers are abroad, for example. We have already sold to Italy and to Monaco, South/North America, Scandinavian countries, everywhere. The people, the entrepreneurs, do not have time to run from one gallery to the next either. Six months ago, we had a prospective buyer who said he had been to ten galleries, here in Cologne, on two afternoons. He had taken extra time off for that.

Iven Orx: Yes, and then there are five artworks hanging there. We have about 400 works of art in our gallery. You can find something suitable here. And we take our time – that's our speciality, that we only offer a proper consultation by appointment. Sometimes we have open days where anyone can come, but these are more informal. If someone is interested in art, we take time for them. So we work primarily by appointment, we take two to three hours to really find out what people are passionate about. They can then find out everything about us, about our art, about the quality. You can choose something that suits you. We also go to the client's home with a selection of artworks, for example if someone wants to buy several to fill a house with art.

We look at how the premises look, what fits best where, and we create a concept with art that really suits the prospective buyer. And that makes us a bit more special. That's why word of mouth works so well, because people tell each other things like that. It's something special. When you go to another gallery, it's often the case that there are three or four works of art hanging there, five at the most. And then they look at you so crossly that you don't even dare – and we both experienced this ourselves here in Cologne – to ask what this means or how much that work of art costs. It's different with us. We have a lot of laughter and you can ask us anything and find out everything about us.



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business-on.de: How important are art fairs?

Iven Orx: Yes, art fairs, that's one thing. Art fairs are very important for the image of a gallery. It is important to be represented there. As far as turnover is concerned, it's not important, we know that from gallery owners here in Cologne. It's more of a loss-making business. Because you hardly sell anything at an art fair. It's just to be present, for the image, and that also affects the price at the end. That's why we don't take part in art fairs, because we said that in the end it doesn't serve the customer, the buyer himself, but only drives up the prices. And that is not necessary.

business-on.de: Is art a business or a hobby?

Iven Orx: For us it is neither. I can only speak for us both, but art is a fulfillment for us. So it's neither a hobby nor a business. It's our passion.

Aaron Vinn: It's like Lagerfeld. He didn't have any hobbies either. His work was his fulfillment. And it's the same with us.

business-on.de: How do you think the art market works?

Aaron Vinn: That's a very broad question.

Iven Orx: We talked about the blue chips earlier. That's the other world, how the art market works. Again, I can only speak for us and for us art is a cultural asset. It is neither a commodity nor something you want to look at through your wallet. It is a lifestyle. It is a piece of life. And how the art market works ... I think everyone has to find their own way – whether you are a gallery owner or an artist – so where you find fulfillment for yourself. There is no rule saying that the market works this way and you have to do it this way or that way. I think with us it's a mixed factor, an institution that consists of many factors. But it is not a rule. You can't say, "This is how it works and not differently." Art is something very individual and personal.

We recommend every artist to be authentic, to be who you are, simply carry your inwardness outwards in the form of art and realise yourself. Then success will come, it will happen by itself. Whether it's your own gallery or a gallery owner who discovers you ... The paths are different. The most important thing is to do what you love.