The Economy of Art

Building a stronger creative economy in Kansas City, an interview with Susana Bruhn, founder of GUILDit

By contributing writer Susan Melgren

When you see a performance or a piece of art, do you ever think about the business aspect of that work? Chances are you don’t. We are drawn to art because it makes a connection on an emotional level. But for the artists behind the work, there’s often more to it than that. Art channels passion—and business has the means to fuel the art. But how to get there? How can an artist successfully turn their passion into a living? How can they grow the business they already have? For GUILDit, art is just as much about economy and entrepreneurship as it is about, well, art. Launched in May 2015, this Kansas City-based organization holds twice-monthly forums where art entrepreneurs can share their stories and in return receive ideas, resources and solutions to help grow their business. Kansas City Spaces sat down recently with Susana Bruhn, the founder and coordinator of GUILDit, to talk about the idea behind the organization and how their process works.

Kansas City Spaces: You’re a relatively new organization. What is your background and how did you come to be? Susana Bruhn: We are inspired by 1 Million Cups, which is a program developed by the Kauffman Foundation four years ago. 1 Million Cups mainly focuses on tech start-ups; we are one of the first to take it into another industry. There had been a buzz for several years in Kansas City to take the concept and apply it to art entrepreneurs, but we were the first ones to take it from an idea to actuality.

One thing that is key about GUILDit is that it focuses on both art and entrepreneurship in Kansas City. Both movements have been growing significantly and have received national attention because of this. GUILDit brings them together in one forum.

KCS: What is your goal? SB: Our biggest goal is to help create a strong creative economy in Kansas City. We do that by working with art entrepreneurs. We have two forums a month with two entrepreneurs presenting at each. The presentations have covered the artists’ inspirations, marketing, collaborations, increasing income and goals, and after the presentation there’s a brainstorming session on solutions that can help them grow their business. They’re not being critiqued so much as encouraged to take the step to the next level. It’s a build-up process.

Rather than just a lecture series, the forums allow the audience to engage with the artists. Instead of watching them on stage or seeing the artist around the gallery, the audience actually gets to hear from the artist about how they present their art and how they hope it is interpreted, as well as hear how they deal with the financial side of the business or how they work on collaborations. We offer a behind-the-scenes look.

KCS: How are artists selected? And how does the forum work? SB: We did look at having emerging artists at first, since 1 Million Cups works with tech start-ups. But the tech industry is very progressive and very competitive, so tech entrepreneurs are used to having all their i’s dotted and t’s crossed when it comes to business, whereas artists start by working on their art and eventually get around to the business side. So we decided to work with experienced artists who already have a working business model that we can help to refine.

During the forum the audience will ask questions like “Have you thought of...” or “How do you...?”. For example, if an artist is struggling with social media, the audience might ask the artist to explain their process so they can better understand. And sometimes just explaining the process out loud can cause the light bulb to go off in the artist’s head. Art entrepreneurs are often solo entrepreneurs, operating on
their own. We provide an out-of-the-box experience to help them think outside themselves.

There’s always a good exchange of ideas, plus it helps build the business confidence of the artists and inspires the audience. Many people in the audience are entrepreneurs themselves. When you’re a solo entrepreneur, you want to reach out and connect with others who are in the same situation. We provide a way for them to get motivated in what they do and how they do it.

KCS: Are there any artists in particular from the last year and a half that have stood out to you?
SB: Sheri Hall. She’s a National Slam Champion. At the time of her forum, she was working a regular job. Through the forum she was looking for the answer to “How do I make that jump into my art and not do a 9-to-5 job anymore?” During her Q&A session last fall, she was not only offered a paying gig to be a guest blogger but was also given an agent referral for a new line of revenue in voiceover work. Paul Tyler from ArtsKC also encouraged her to apply for residency programs so she could have her first book of poetry produced by a publishing house.

That was last November. Earlier this year, Sheri left her 9-to-5 job to pursue her art full-time. She is using several streams of revenue to support herself, including the blogging. She is actively pursuing voiceover work and residencies, and her book Black Girl Shattered is due out in December.

In the past we’ve also hosted some of Kansas City’s favorite artists, including Jose Faus, Peregrine Honig, Heidi Van, David Basse, Vi Tran and Glen North.

KCS: Do you host any other events?
SB: We offer what we call our ARTx Talks at the downtown library. It’s more of a lecture series, similar to TEDx, where you come and listen to inspirational talks for 20 minutes. In July we hosted international illustrators Mark English and Sterling Hundley, with more than 200 attending. We are looking to have another one in December.

KCS: What artists will you be featuring in November?
SB: This month we have dancers Garry Abbott and Jane Gotch presenting on November 10th from 6:30 to 7:30 p.m. at the Uptown Arts Bar. Come be inspired and help them build even better businesses!

GUILDid holds forums twice a month: the 2nd Thursday from 6:30-7:30 p.m. at the Uptown Arts Bar, and the 4th Thursday from 12-1 p.m. at the Kemper Museum.

GUILDid Forums & ARTx Talks


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