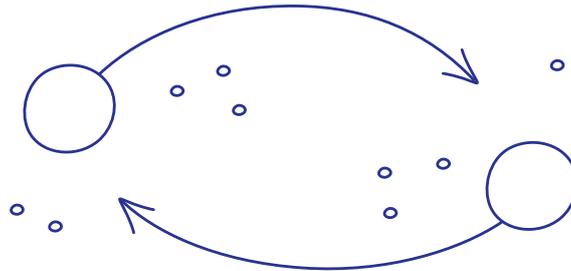


FERAL BUSINESS

How to take back global trade?

How to get out of conventional logics of what a business is?



What makes business such a good space for economic experimentation?

Kate Rich is an artist and trader. For the last 20 years she has been running Feral Trade, a trading business through which she buys and sells coffee as well as other food supplies. She is also part of The Cube, a self-organised cinema based in Bristol (UK). There she is part of the group taking care of the space's economies. During the last years, she has been developing the Feral MBA, as a course that teaches how to use business as an art form and how to use art to question conventional business practices.

What is a feral business?

I'm using the word feral to mean willfully wild like a pigeon rather than romantically wild like a wolf – the idea of being urban, opportunistic, scavenging. When I started to work as a trade artist, about 20 years ago, I realised how much even artists internalise conventional logics of what a business is and should be. The pressure of having to get ahead, busyness as a sign of self-validation, but also using sticking with conventional forms of business plans and administration formats. So with the term feral business I invite myself and others into a process of unlearning, of taking apart these things and then putting back them together according to a different, non-market logic. Feral business is for everyone

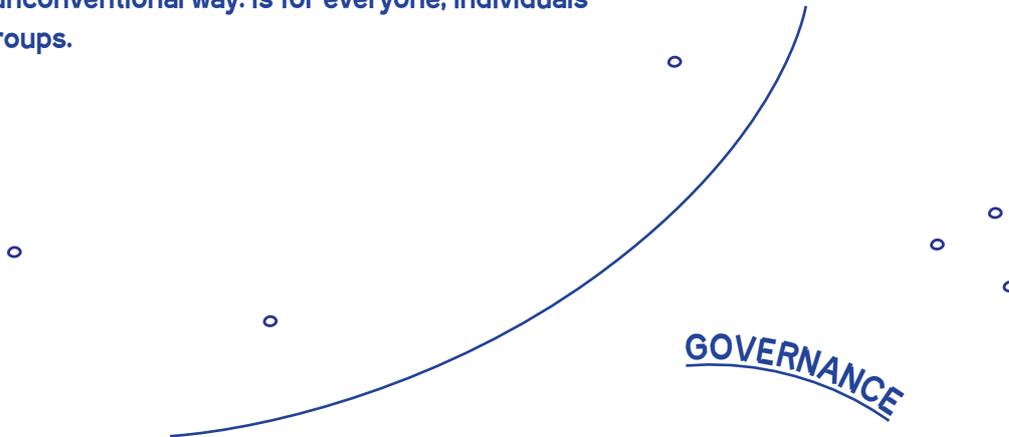
because I consider each person as a unit of livelihood that has to sustain itself and learn how to survive well together with others.

How did you develop this definition?

In 2003, I started to investigate what it would be to trade with a different set of principles from the globalised commodity market, by starting a coffee and grocery trade through my physical social networks. That became the Feral Trade project, still active today. Rather than just theorizing about trade, I wanted to actually experiment with it in practice. Becoming a trader myself was a way of getting hands-on with some of the tricky and impenetrable dilemmas of business and economy. The idea of making economic experiments on a national scale – as an ideological project, such as we have been witnessing many wild examples of in the past years with our reckless politicians – is a pretty risky proposition. But experimenting with economy on the scale of your own business is something that is much more approachable. You can start it tomorrow, you can take small risks without crashing the whole ship. So I'm interested in business as a place to do experiments and communicate meaning – a philosophical instrument you can navigate with and in – while also making some cash on the side. Business is a fantastically fascinating place that has all these capacities

GROUP/ACTORS

A method that group members can apply to understand inside their cultural organisation how to use business in an unconventional way. Is for everyone, individuals and groups.



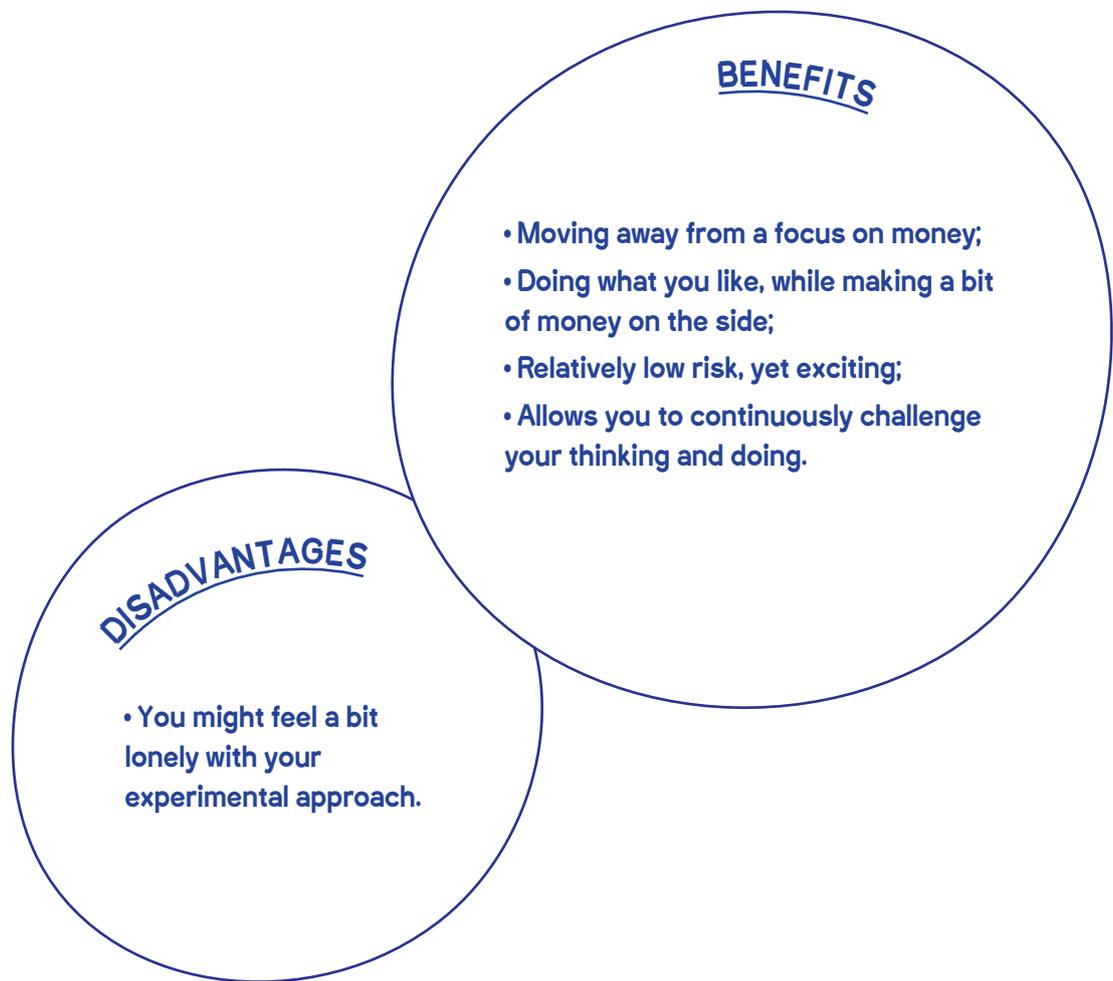
Doing business becomes a form of art. This means all conventional aspects of doing business can be challenged.

What is the Feral MBA?

In the background of running Feral Trade, I undertook a part-time undergraduate degree in business and economics in a kind of undercover way – undercover as an artist in the business school – to learn more about conventional business approaches. I also started to notice a number of interesting, significant and uncommon businesses around me – other people doing business differently – and learning from those as well. A couple of years ago I decided to bring these influences together in a format to support others who might want to liberate their imaginations and expectations of business and livelihood. In February 2020, I tested the first pilot programme of the Feral MBA in Tasmania, Australia over 4 weeks, with a group of 18 artists and others. In the programme we toured around an array of venues from a privately owned contemporary art museum to the co-operatively run waste recycling centre, and conducted deep listening exercises focused on each others' business and livelihood dilemmas. A lot of the interesting things that came out of that process are not mentioned much in regular business training. People were exploring the value of vulnerability and openness as alternatives to expected modes of business presentation of confidence and the pitch, and working with experiments instead of a fixation on narrow definitions of business success. We talked about recognising the kinds of things we were doing already as also economic

and of what conditions in the wider business environment would be needed, to allow such diverse approaches to thrive.

The focus of the Feral MBA is on business as a vehicle and a vantage point from which to encounter this strange thing that we call the economy. In art and activism I see a lot of activity around interrogating, modelling and discussing economics, but this often seems to remain at a level of critique or abstraction – talking about things without any actual consequences. In the art world there is also a tradition of art 'about' business, as distinct from people actually doing it. Temporary things – there was an artist who opened up an ice cream van at a big arts biennial, but just as a project to appear in that programme. It doesn't sustain anything beyond that, and I'm left wondering – why not use some of those intensive resources to go into business for real? That would be much more interesting! – to breach outside these short-term arts budgets and attention spans. With all the capacities that you ostensibly have as an artist to think differently – how could that actually address some of the struggles or limitations of thinking that business have – and also sustain livelihood and broker relationships in a more ongoing way? I think there is a super-interesting contribution that artists can make here, as part of a much more diverse ecology of business types and shapes than is normally accounted for – for a business ecology that should be as diverse as



everything else. Another thing we encountered a lot in the Feral MBA was a widespread sense of moral struggle, the shame and guilt that is built into transactions, money and valuing our work. This applied to many of the artists and non-artists alike. My interest is to shift those questions from a judgemental space to an experimental one – where the question is not about doing ‘good’ but: was it a good experiment? Did something happen? Did we learn something? It takes away the value judgments that often come in around money.

The experimental approach also helps to understand ‘business’ as a diverse collection of things – and to get away from the idea that your business should do it all and contain it all; that it needs to be perfect and successful, and that you always need to be confident and focused on getting ahead. Your business is part of what you do, part of the environment you operate in. It’s personal and political, as well as commercial. A lot of what we deal with in business is an understandable fear of failing in these things, an all-or-nothing pressure that can completely paralyse even the aspects of the project that might be working well. Concentrating your whole livelihood and identity in the business – and making its success synonymous with your own – can create a kind of terror. That’s one of the things that the Feral MBA wants to work with and break down.

Can you give us two examples of feral businesses and how they operate?

One example I really like is Company Drinks in London. They describe themselves as an art project in the form of a drinks enterprise. They run a small business, bottling drinks, but they are also taking people in their community out on bus trips to harvest leftover black currants from the factory farm for example – then they make drinks together and do events with the drinks. It is a community gathering where commerce is almost a ‘front’ for the social activities, in a way that is quite political – they also describe themselves as a political project.

Another example I work with is the Sailing Cargo Alliance that brings together very different types of organisations and people who are all working on reinventing the ancient art of sailing cargo on traditional wind-propelled ships. On one hand, you have Maersk, the container ship company, thinking of adding sails to their ships to reduce their environmental impact, which is something. But in the Alliance, you have a small team of people restoring an eighteenth century ship, rebuilding it themselves, and sailing cargo across the Atlantic or from Portugal up to Norway. The spirit of what they’re doing isn’t about tinkering with the metrics of business as usual, which is the Maersk approach – it’s born from a desire for the life at sea and for very different kinds of ways of transacting and living. In the UK, the New Dawn Traders have developed the Voyage Cooperative model, that brings together the

AN EXAMPLE OF A FERAL BUSINESS

①

HOW TO START

Develop a desire to challenge conventions.
Decide what convention you want to challenge.

②

HOW LONG IT TAKES

It is an ongoing process.

③

RESOURCES

Work with whatever you have at hand.

④

USEFUL CHOICES

Think beyond money.

producers, the ship owners, the sailers, the trader and the buying co-operatives on the customer side, into the same business venture. It's a radically different way of structuring trade, where all these sections of the supply chain – who would normally be in competition over price – are invested in a shared endeavor together. And the motivation is wanting to make and build and change something – the business is just part of that.

Further links and references:

- Feral MBA: <https://fo.am/events/feral-mba-inception>
- Feral Trade: <https://feraltrade.org>
- Company Drinks: <http://companydrinks.info>
- New Dawn Traders: <https://www.newdawntraders.com>