AVANT-GARDE
The origins of The Dream Café’s philosophy and processes are firmly rooted in an approach to the art of radical innovation, which started with café conversations. The informality of the café encouraged the development of interdisciplinary and transcultural discourses that led to a clear pattern of beliefs, practices and lifestyle habits that gave rise to the term ‘avant-garde’, which initially became clearly visible in France in the 1880s.

The coffee house forged the principles of the café as a fermenting pot for revolution during the eighteenth century. This meeting place informed unprecedented scientific breakthroughs and the industrialization of manufacturing. However, its impact on the arts did not achieve the same level of radical conceptual experimentation that occurred in France in the latter half of the nineteenth century and beyond.

The term avant-garde came into use in the early twentieth century, and was used to define a shift in emphasis from classical dependency to experimental challenge in which artist and other intellectuals redefined the parameter of the known, and effectively acted as the vanguard of modernity. Cafés became the catalyst and a crucial source of facilitation for a whole new way of thinking and doing that was fuelled by interdisciplinary and multi-cultural moments of connectivity around café tables.

We focus this brief introduction on the formative phase of the avant-garde (c. 1850s–1920s) including ‘The Belle Époque’ (beautiful period).

During the latter half of the nineteenth century, France – and Paris in particular – provided a heady context of revolution as volatile politics and energetic entrepreneurship combined to shape opportunity for innovation. Those parts of Paris that have become the major tourist attractions today were created during the 1850s through a process of massive urban disruption, which ripped out and built over
the medieval core of the old city in less than a decade. Masterminded and managed by Baron Haussmann, the new Paris became the blueprint for the modern city. It created unprecedented social and economic opportunities that redefined how many people experienced urban life.

The artists, musicians, writers, poets, critics, designers and craftspeople who flocked to the city in this period of ferment were inspired and facilitated by a context in which unprecedented developments in science, technology, retail, entertainment and transport were emerging. While city dwellers had to accept tumult as a significant characteristic of contemporary life, the avant-garde embraced this flux as a source of inspiration and opportunity. The impact that the café had on intellectual and creative life is captured by the words of Irish novelist George Moore, in his book *Confessions of a Young Man*, published just after the turn of the century:

*I did not go to either Oxford or Cambridge, but I went to La Nouvelle Athènes … though unacknowledged, though unknown, the influence of the Nouvelle Athènes is inveterate in the artistic thought of the nineteenth century.*

(George Moore, *Confessions of a Young Man*, 1901)

This urban upheaval acted as a magnet for artists and other experimentally inclined practitioners and theorists. Their desire to be where the action was led them to reinforce the development of an infrastructure that supported a bohemian lifestyle. New kinds of entertainment emerged, and benefitted financially by enabling the inquisitive access to its less orthodox customers. The infamous Black Cat Café (Le Chat Noir) in Montmartre, established in 1881, provided the blueprint for the decadent mix of cabaret, food and alcohol that fuelled the avant-garde. Montmartre was on the fault-line of the upheaval that reshaped Paris. Its mix of affordable rooms, galleries, cafés and brothels provided the context in which to found the Society of Incoherent Arts – arguably the first example of a deliberate concern to disrupt established notions of form and function in the arts.

By the start of the twentieth century, Paris had become renowned as a centre for disruptive experiments in art, lifestyle and culture. The kind of stimulating nurturing and facilitating context that it provided was essential for provoking and sustaining disruption. France was managing to encourage a process of reciprocation in which cultural innovation was inspired by the context of urban change, while helping to translate and define it.
The development of an avant-garde culture depended on the interaction between different personalities, stimuli and motivations. However, the courage to defy convention informed the evolution, and subsequently the influence, of the key practitioners who continue to give meaning to the term.

**Learning to Ignore NO**

One of the most important characteristics of the avant-garde is the refusal to heed when the gatekeepers say no. Being a pathfinder can be difficult, and requires people with an ability to override rejection. An avant-garde business is going to need to be confident and resilient to translate rejection into success. Fortunately, the history of innovation is littered with case studies of businesses that hung in there – and ended up owning the future.

One classic example of this is the problems that filmmaker George Lucas encountered in his attempts to sell his concept of a franchise for toys relating to the first *Star Wars* film. This was art trying to convert to business; according to *Wired Magazine* editor Chris Baker ‘It’s easy to forget that before Star Wars, licensed merchandise was a different, less profitable business. All the big toymakers turned down the rights to make Star Wars action figures; upstart Kenner didn’t sign on until a month before the film’s release.’ The *Star Wars* franchise opportunity’s subsequent success redefined the toy industry, and continues to serve as a benchmark to this day, with annual sales in excess of $3 billion.

**How Artists do Avant-Garde**

Artists Charles Baudelaire and Marcel Duchamp played an instrumental role in defining the characteristics of the avant-garde through their capacity to challenge not only the status quo but also the nature and purpose of art itself. Though best known as a poet, Baudelaire also worked as an influential art critic, while Duchamp moved from painting to ‘ready-mades’ before giving up ‘making art’ to play chess.

Baudelaire demonstrated the symbiotic and changing possibilities of the artist’s relationship with the urban landscape and the wider social and cultural context. At the start of his career he mourns the loss of the old city: that ‘the old Paris is no more’. However, he responded enthusiastically a decade later to the new urban landscape in the dedication to his book *Le Spleen de Paris*:
Who among us has not dreamt, in moments of ambition, of the miracle of a poetic prose, musical without rhythm and rhyme, supple and staccato enough to adapt to the lyrical stirrings of the soul, the undulations of dreams, and sudden leaps of consciousness.

(Charles Baudelaire, *Le Spleen de Paris*, 1869)

Baudelaire defined the characteristics of the avant-garde as a way of life that was intentionally at odds with the mores of conventional society. He lived a life that would still be considered as provocative today, dressing and acting as an outsider.

Baudelaire also played a key role in establishing art as a force of disruption, by confronting traditional rules of grammar. He reframed how we understand language’s metaphoric capacity, and opened up the aesthetic possibilities that lie beyond grammar’s conventional frame. Much like a brand that establishes a new need by essentially discovering a latent desire, Baudelaire challenged a set of conventions that had effectively become culturally reinforced as a set of rules. In this respect, Baudelaire developed an essential maxim of disruptive behaviour: test, and then break the rules wherever they restrict innovative potential.

Compared to contemporary luminaries like Picasso, Marcel Duchamp had – publicly at least – a relatively brief career as a practising artist. However, the significance of his contribution has even more impact on art and life today than it did when he first exhibited his work. A clue to Duchamp’s significance for development of the art of disruption lies in a famous quote: ‘I force myself to contradict myself in order to avoid conforming to my own taste.’

Duchamp challenged himself as well as the mores of his time. Although his early work largely applied the traditional craft skills that remained central to the practice of many of his avant-garde contemporaries, Duchamp appeared to realize the contradiction inherent in utilizing traditional techniques to shape the future.

The formation of Duchamp’s conceptual breakthroughs clearly owes much to his interactions with the Dada movements. The approach’s common interest in disruptive practice simultaneously parodied the old order while developing new aesthetic possibilities that redefined art’s form and function.

Duchamp instinctively understood that the scientific approach to innovation – one where the individual achieved objectivity through incremental steps framed
by pre-existing rules, or repeated laws to prove a thesis – was at odds with the process that enabled the artist to trust in his or her emotions. Duchamp proposed that:

*The artist goes from intention to realisation through a chain of totally subjective reactions offer business an insight into the value of gut reaction as a valuable source of innovation opportunity. In contrast to the tendency of the ‘scientific’ approach to minimize unpredictable outcomes artists are more likely to discover unprecedented potential by trusting in chance.*

(Marcel Duchamp, *The Creative Act*, 1957)

Duchamp’s transformation of everyday products into art works through the combination of signature and gallery display simultaneously disrupted the history of art, exhibiting, criticism, curating and collecting. His radical proposition was arguably the single most disruptive act in the history of art: ‘My idea was to choose an object that wouldn’t attract me, either by its beauty or by its ugliness. To find a point of indifference in my looking at it, you see.’

**The Business of being Avant-Garde**

The most important takeaway from Duchamp’s contribution to the avant-garde is the need to challenge archetypes. This is equally true for brands, which waste so much time and money supporting tired propositions when they could be investing in game changing innovation.

The cafés of Montmartre did not just cater for artists; rather, they were part of a mix of individuals on a common endeavour to take ownership of the future. The crowd that came to cafés to converse and disrupt were inspired by the entrepreneurs, scientists and engineers who were challenging the very notion of what was possible. Gustave Eiffel’s monumental Viaduc De Garabit, completed in 1884, had already signalled the potential for a new age of engineering transformation long before the Eiffel Tower opened for business in 1899. Pasteur had made the world a safer place through some extraordinary medical breakthroughs in the field of vaccination. Shopping was becoming a new form of leisure, ushering in the growth of the fashion industry as seasons emerged as a pretext for the notion of
style redundancy. France had pioneered the department store concept of retailing in 1838 with the opening of Le Bon Marché.

**Brand Dreams**

The construction of the Eiffel Tower served as a contemporary icon to define a future-looking city. In the same way, the emergence of modern retail in Paris informed the evolution of the art of innovative branding. There was proactive serendipity between modern art and commerce as the aesthetics that emerged from café culture were quickly co-opted into the labelling and advertising of new brands.

There is a clear synchronicity between the conditions that gave way to the birth of the avant-garde in the late nineteenth century and the instability that brands are currently facing today. However, there are three essential differences that inform the rationale for The Dream Café. Specifically, today there is:

- Less opportunity for face-to-face interdisciplinary and cross-cultural discourse.
- An emphasis on efficiency that has devalued conversational discourse as a social opportunity not related to business.
- Increasing displacement of up-close-and-personal engagement with online conversation.

It is clear that the ad hoc and serendipitous opportunity that cafés provided for unanticipated connections was the secret of their success. Later in the book we will spend some time introducing our methodologies, and acknowledge the debt we owe to the pioneering spirits that informed and benefitted from a culture that valued time spent in meaningful conversation.

For the time being, we want to be clear that we will never claim to be able to compress the complex mix of time, place, people and context into a three or four day experience leading to an outcome as profound as the theory of relativity or cubism. Although more modest, however, we are still capable of creating a paradigm shift. By synthesizing and prioritizing the key ingredients that allowed café culture to stir radical Innovation, we can enable our clients to let go of the rules. This will enable them to reconsider everything they formerly saw as a challenge as an opportunity for themselves and the world.
Some of the Lessons that Contemporary Business can Learn from the Avant-Garde

Disruptions are always likely to incite resistance. Change typically involves upsetting people who feel that their values and knowledge are being threatened by people and principles that they do not understand. Robert Hughes captured the impact of disruption in his phrase ‘the shock of the new’.

Creative individuals’ ability to simultaneously respond to and drive change is a skill that many businesses today lack. The avant-garde’s reputation was initially based on its capacity to challenge the status quo, and the conspicuous confidence its members displayed while doing so. While these individuals enjoyed a symbiotic relationship with the dominant culture, they also had a high degree of autonomy, effectively existing and operating as a subculture. While subcultures do exist in businesses, they are often and unfortunately a dysfunctional bi-product of a lack of effective discourse between different spheres of expertise, and/or management. The most obvious and most typical example of the battle between the quest for efficiency and the need for innovation is demonstrated by businesses that invest in efficiency enablers like ‘Six Sigma’ – only to find their innovation outcomes declining.

Bureaucracy has a tendency to prioritize processes that deliver predictable outcomes at the expense of ad hoc creativity. American multi-national conglomerate corporation 3M – a business that had built a reputation for innovation – saw a 9 percent fall in revenue from new products as a result of an efficiency (Six Sigma) strategy introduced in 2001. Although the drive for efficiency did achieve significant savings in manufacturing costs and other areas where people could be replaced by technology, it restricted the opportunity for unpredictable cross-cultural fertilization, which had flourished previously. The solution implemented in 2005 involved setting up teams, deliberately composed of people with different discipline expertise, who were given the freedom to operate outside of the Six Sigma regime. By 2010 innovation income was back up to 30 percent and rising.

Pivotal Locations

Art is frequently profiled as a solitary activity that emerges from a context of personal deprivation. Yet its history reveals another level of engagement focused on conviviality and discourse between different disciplines. The Black Cat in Montmartre was an iconic location that allowed artists and other creative dreamers to meet in an environment with which they could identify as a symbol of rebellion and otherness. The heady mix of food, drink and entertainment established The Black Cat...
as an engine of cultural revolution. It united different classes and interest groups in a place where they mixed freely and gained confidence in a world where rules matter less than ideas.

**Dream Cafés**

Picasso and others arrived in Paris too late to frequent The Black Cat, which closed in 1887. However, they sought out and founded their own equivalents. It is clear that food, drink and live entertainment facilitated and encouraged intellectual and artistic exchange. Development also played an important role in forming this culture of disruption. As Roger Shattuck confirms, in his illuminating history of the ‘banquet years’, creative practitioners and their patrons created their own banquets to deliberately foster opportunity for creative exchange and inspiration.

**Context**

Paris in the later nineteenth and early twentieth century became an important location for retail businesses focused on experience. As a result of the unprecedented explosion of entrepreneurial ambition, Paris became a world centre that attracted all types of cultural creatives. Revolutionary and iconic structures like the Arcades and the Eiffel Tower, together with the cabarets and cafés, helped to create an impression that Paris was the centre of the universe for fostering challenging and provocative ideas. The fact that many of the artists who became leading figures of the modern movement were attracted by this mythology, and then went on to actualize the myths, is an important factor in the creation of this self-fulfilling prophecy.

**Investment**

While many artists did indeed starve, Paris became a centre for the patronage and commoditization of culture that served to attract artists, audiences and investors. In many respects the modus operandi of the art investors who monetized the avant-garde is similar to the enlightened risk takers that grow disruptive businesses by aligning investment with ideas on the basis of instinct rather than precedent.

**Style**

Paris took the lead as a location for style and fashion in particular during this period. Along with the creation of the haute couture business of high-end fashion
houses, Paris became a centre for the Dandy; and the Flaneur, bohemian style allowed artists and their followers to dress the part and gain recognition and sense of significance. This was a lesson that David Ogilvy, the Englishman who had a huge impact on the development of American advertising during the 1950s and 1960s, clearly absorbed. Many regard Ogilvy as the creator of the style and strategy of modern advertising; and he freely acknowledged that he used his penchant for distinctive sartorial style (including wearing kilts in Madison Avenue) as a means of drawing attention to his agency: ‘if you can’t advertise yourself, what hope do you have of advertising anything else?’

Paris became a blueprint for later cultural revolutions in which style and content played respective roles in reinforcing a sense of intentional and confident difference.

**Critical Engagement**

Paris attracted almost as many theorists and critics as it did creators, which helped develop a context for promoting, debating and evolving ideas. The twenty-first century seems to be full of theorists and critics who use others’ creative endeavours as a platform for assuming ownership of art instead of working in the spirit of co-creation to evolve a constructive synergy between practice and theory.

Unquestioning obedience to tradition is the only thing keeping you from a more remarkable future. Considering the context that produced this work – and the mind-sets of the artists that created it – offers a useful introduction to the origins, characteristics and implications of disruption. The first phase of the avant-garde involved significant levels of daring innovation. However, the environment of conventional wisdom, risk-averse control and formulaic solutions that informed it is alive and well to this day. Responses to this context of constant change became a recurring source of the avant-garde’s work. It is what enabled them to develop metaphors and new conceptual opportunities, which encouraged a reframing of the ways that we understood our relationship with the world.

It would be impossible to replicate the particular set of circumstances and personalities that enabled the radical challenges to the dominant canons of culture and aesthetics that defined the avant-garde. However, it is possible to emulate some of the characteristics of what constitutes a creative context and a disruptive practitioner.