# We make art work

Flag spinning machines, simulators for sun and moon positions, computer installations that register face symmetry, an mp3 player set up with sensors to detect the movement of tree branches… Nothing seems beyond the realm of the possible for Thomas Nagels, engineer, entrepreneur and co-founder of Culture Crew, a company that brings art to life and makes life into art.
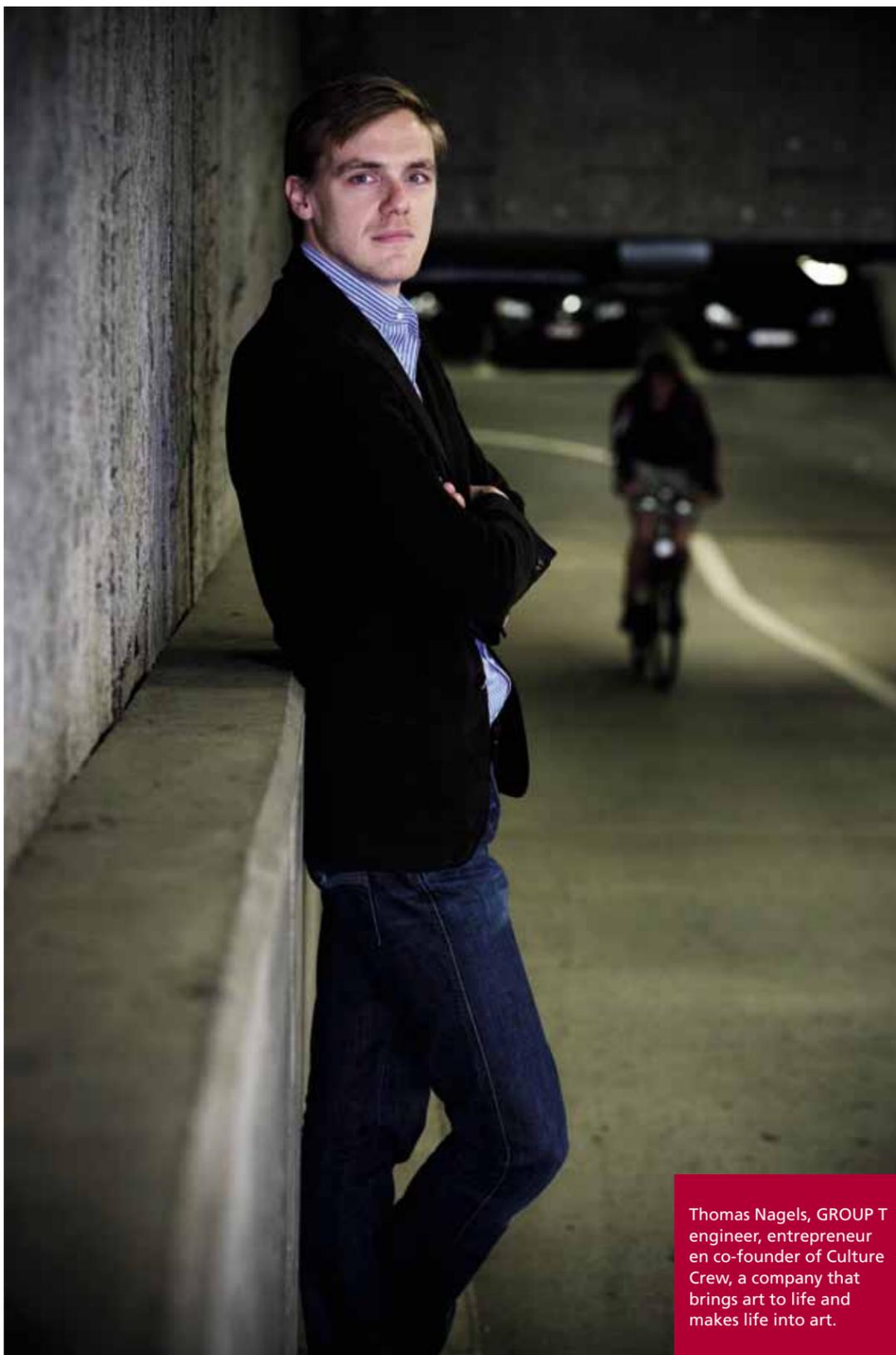
Thomas Nagels, GROUP T engineer, entrepreneur en co-founder of Culture Crew, a company that brings art to life and makes life into art.

Thomas graduated from GROUP T in 2004 with a degree in Electromechanical Engineering in the then major Automation. Even before he obtained his diploma, he had already signed a contract and led a team of eight people in the Dutch company Stakebrand, specialized in the design and construction of theater mechanics.
"Making theater involves quite a lot of technology", Thomas states. "My thesis was about the automation of a hoisting installation for use in fly lofts. It's a complex problem, not only mechanically but also in terms of safety." Thomas's design effectively went into production and is still used in about 30 theaters in Belgium and The Netherlands.

Technically complex

After heading the company's electro department for two years, Thomas felt he was ready for a new challenge, this time in the shape of a commercial function in a company specialized in theater textiles, among other things.

"This, too, is more technically complex than it seems at first", Thomas continues. "It is about more than just putting up a curtain. For instance, theater textiles must be flame-retardant, sound-dampening, etc. My job consisted in coming up with and selling tailored solutions." Yet another two years later and we would find Thomas with the lighting company Etap in Malle. He was responsible for the service contracts of the emergency lighting department but soon realized that functioning in greater company structures was not for him, really. So it was time to start 'something' himself. 'Culture Crew' was it and its core business was to offer solutions for the technical aspect of art installations.

Technical-creative

"In fact it was a leap into the unknown", Thomas admits. "The label 'technical-creative' can be interpreted very broadly. You start somewhere, but never know where it will lead exactly. Every project is different, just like every artist we work with is unique."
Thomas's first project immediately struck gold. "For the Venice Biennale, we built a computer installation with Koen Vanmechelen. The installation registers face symmetry and sends high-resolution moving images through live internet. Visitors are asked to fill out a questionnaire about their descent so that correlations can be established about the extent of facial symmetry. This symmetry plays an important role in our ideal of beauty." Thomas's installation ran in Venice for six months without a hitch, which in itself is an achievement.
Meanwhile, the Culture Crew built a new prototype mp3 player, a machine spinning a flag in three dimensions, which follows people that walk past it, a simulator that calculates the precise position of the sun and the moon from any place and at any time on earth, and so on.

Unsolvable ideas

"It is the artist who initiates the creative process", Thomas asserts. "He or she walks around with an idea but doesn't know how to realize it, especially when it involves technology. Our mission consists in taking away the unsolvable aspect of an idea and coming up with a solution together. Many artists who've come to us had come up empty-handed elsewhere. For them a whole world of possibilities opens up when they learn that what they have in mind is not undoable after all." Whether artists are difficult? "That's an idée fixe",

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Thomas believes. "The point is that technicians often don't understand the artists and artists don't understand the technicians. There is no point bombarding them with complicated technical explanations, because the how is often not important to them. Still, you must see to it that by oversimplifying no essential information is lost. Another crucial factor is trust. A project can only become a success if a bond of trust is established. But artists are not really difficult, although it is sometimes a bit easier to work with experienced people: they usually know exactly what they want."

Engineer and inventor

"Electromechanical engineering was a good choice", Thomas concludes. "It is the most polyvalent program and provides an excellent base. A plumber thinks in terms of pipes and water, an electrician in terms of electricity. But an Electromechanics engineer doesn't have those limitations. That's why engineers and artists get along so well. We like to go where nobody has gone before, to color outside the lines, we like to come up with new things, we like to do things that seem impossible at first. We make art work."

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www.culturecrew.be