

V THE VENTURES OF MIR LADA

An Organic Approach to the Business of Creativity

BY LESLIE HUNT

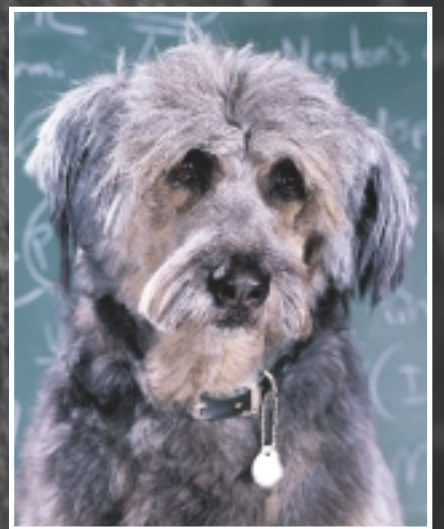
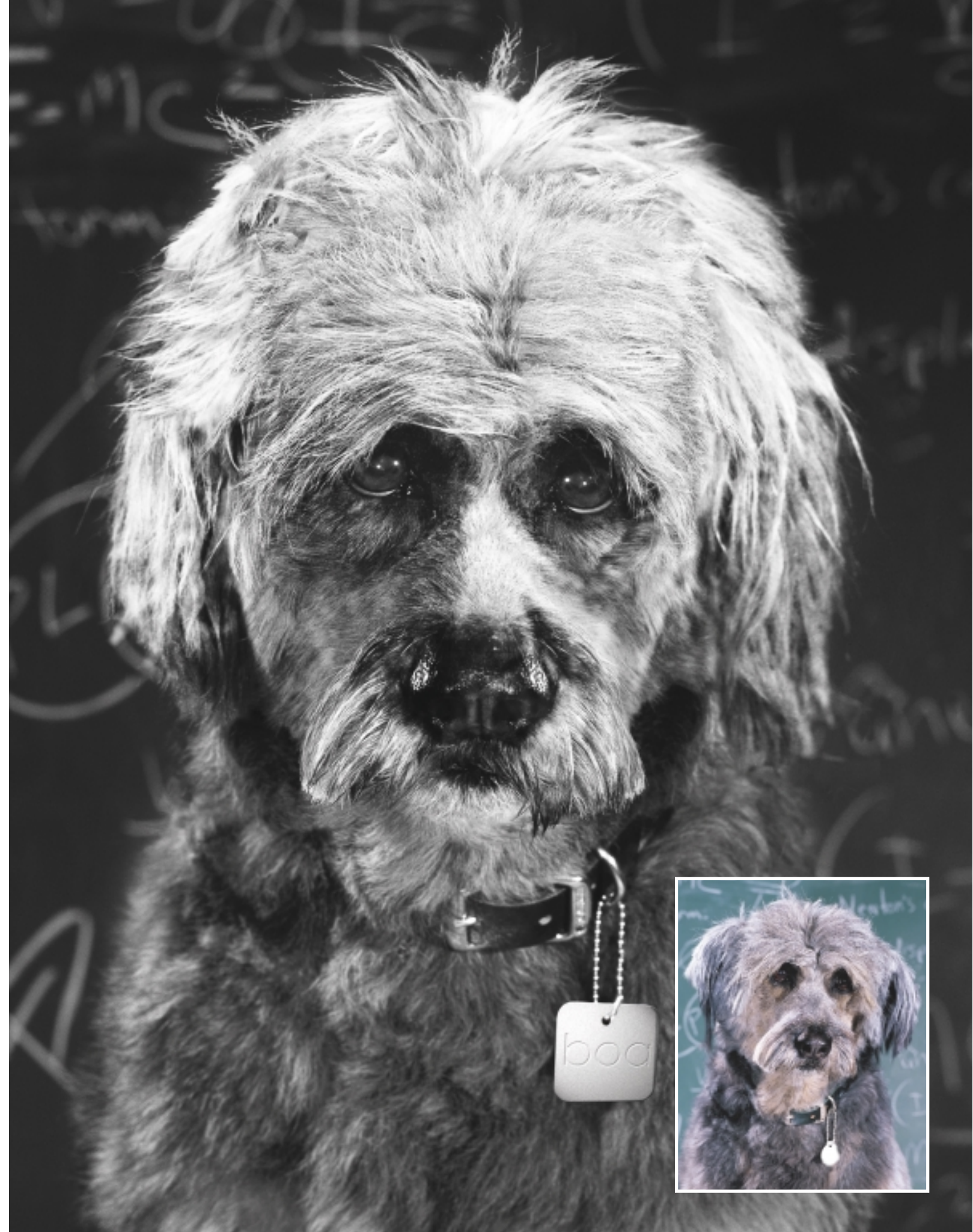
Mir Lada is the kind of person whose life seems chaotic while it's happening, but somehow makes perfect sense in retrospect. It's the same with his successful business ventures in Toronto: Mir Lada, the eponymous house of photography, Boa Digital, and Boa Media.

From the beginning, the artist-photographer approached business as he would a design project, plunging in with the full force of his creative energy. In this model, projects take on their own momentum, problems become challenges and challenges become solutions. Then the artist goes looking for fresh challenges. At the end of it, the business has grown, the artist himself has grown, and the projects have generated more energy than they have consumed. That's Lada's business model in a Zip file.

Mir Lada started out 10 years ago with a one-man studio of photography and design (www.mirlada.com).

One of four images created for a Hewlett-Packard campaign (left) and, opposite, the results of client asking Lada to transform an image of a dog (inset) to resemble the face of Albert Einstein. It took 28 hours of digital work, many of which were spent transplanting hair.

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Created for a pharmaceutical ad campaign, "Mother's Little Helper," above, was inspired by the Rolling Stones song, "Paint It Black." The powerful vapor action of a new chewing gum causes this kid's eyeballs to pop out of his head (opposite). It is one of two transit posters for the launch of Max Air gum.

As his interests and skills evolved toward digital imaging and illustration, the business underwent a gradual kind of mitosis, forming a symbiotic new business, Boa Digital (www.boadigital.com), a digital imaging service.

Lada added imagers and workstations as needed, and the business expanded into adjoining studio spaces. At every opportunity, he

upgraded his equipment. For instance, he currently uses an Epson Expression Special Edition 1680 flatbed scanner and has his eye on a new Nikon Super Coolscan 8000 ED film scanner. In Lada's business model, every outlay on personnel, equipment, and working space has to pay for itself in short order, and downtime must be kept to a minimum.

With full-time artisans to perform routine imaging tasks for his own designs, Lada could concentrate on the creative end, spend a day or two a week shooting advertising jobs in the photo studio, and manage the development of the business. He still oversees each project that leaves the studio, coloring and polishing it until the piece looks the way he'd envisioned.

Perfect sense

Before his 1990 graduation from Ryerson Polytechnical Technical University, Canada's R.I.T., Lada was already a pro photographer, with a studio loft in Queen Street and clients like Harley-Davidson and Toyota buying advertising photography. For years, editorial photography was the studio's bread-and-butter and the artist's proving ground.

By 1993, Lada could justify the business expense of buying an Apple Macintosh Centris and Adobe Photoshop 2.0, which had just been released. Friend Doug Laxdal, owner of the Gas Company imaging service bureau in Toronto, had been showing Lada how to do a few digital masking tricks on this new computer when Canada's premier photo magazine called with an assignment. Can I do the job digitally? he asked the PhotoLife art director. Why not, she said. Artists were still delivering digital jobs on hard drives back then, and Lada had to wing it on the color management. "But it worked," he says. "I'm still proud of those full-page, double-truck images I did on that Centris." Some 25 digital projects later, Lada could justify a computer upgrade. Today the design house has several Apple Power Mac G3s and G4s and a wardrobe of imaging software. Time and again, artistic impulse would fuel the company's

growth, and throw open the door to creative opportunity.

At some point, Lada realized that he'd been approaching assignments not as a photographer, but as an illustrator. "I use a camera only as an instrument," he says. In 1996, one of the Bell Telephone companies commissioned him to design an advertising piece for a new toll-free number. The project started in the customary way, with Lada's visualizing the final image first, with translucent glass numbers in 3-D. He did not see any practical way to build and photograph a model.

Using the somewhat primitive Alias Sketch 3-D program for the first time "was a photographer's dream come true," says Lada. "I could light the set as I pleased, with no electrical chords in the picture, no equipment reflected in the glass numbers—no photographic elements at all. I'm thinking, 'How do I invoice this?' It isn't a photograph but an illustration."

Two years ago, knowing nothing about creating a website, Lada dove into producing a new site for himself in his characteristic headlong way. The venture took on a life of its own and Boa Media was born. "Now we're running our own NT server out of the studio, we're creating websites for multiple clients, writing Java from scratch, and we've got our own programmer doing back-end databases," he says.

"My work is a reflection of my everyday approach to life," says Lada. "I'm an open and sociable person. From client meetings to having people on the set during a shoot to my helpers, I try to keep it fun, high energy and very positive. Dark, mysterious images just aren't part of my personality. The business is very much part of my artistic expression. I do this because it's a passion." ◀

What's in a Name?

"My first name means peace, agreement, world, and society in Ukrainian and Russian," says Mir Lada, whose lineage is indeed Ukrainian, though he was born in Philadelphia. "Lada" was the god of love and beauty in that region's lore, he says.

Why Boa Digital and Boa Media? "I realized there's a certain beauty in a three-letter name," says Lada. "It's a short, pure sound, vaguely non-English feeling when you say it." He likes the dual meaning of the word—frilly, feminine stole and deadly snake. "That opposition of things, that duality, represents what we do around here, photography and illustration," he says. "And the letters themselves, B-O-A, look good. In the right type face, each of them is a perfect circle."

The names seem to work, too. The short list of Lada's clients includes *The Wall Street Journal*, Visa, Evian, *Esquire*, Pepsi, *Rolling Stone*, Doubleday, Price Waterhouse, Xerox, Hewlett-Packard, and Canon.

