

“Artful Conversations” at the WZB, September 1, 2008

The first “Artful Conversation” at the WZB on September 1, 2008 brought together a small group of artists who have engaged in artistic interventions in organizations with a few social scientists who are interested in this phenomenon as a potential cultural source of newness. The idea is to open a space for artists to talk about what they have tried out, what motivates them to engage in these kinds of activities, and to share experiences of interventions that they feel have been successful and those that have been disappointing. The contribution of the social scientists lies in bringing in concepts and questions from the literature to stimulate the reflection on experience, from which the academics would like to learn. We hope that the diversity of participants will also draw out clashes of views on the nature of the possible or desirable relationship between arts and private and public sector organizations. The first conversation generated an agenda for future conversations--and projects.



First “Artful Conversation” at the Social Science Research Center Berlin (WZB) September 1, 2008 Organised by Ariane Berthoin Antal

On September 1, 2008 we invited artists to the first Artful Conversation at the WZB as part of a research stream about artistic interventions in organizations within the research unit “Cultural Sources of Newness”. The objective of the event was to create a space in which artists could reflect on their experiences with artistic interventions in companies and other organisations and discuss them with social scientists. Key points I learned from the day are summarized below. I owe particular thanks to Jörg Reckhenrich for helping me identify a diverse group of artists, and to Henrik Schrat for his advice on how to get the most out of the Conversation with this mix of participants.

Participants

Prof. Ariane Berthoin Antal, WZB
Ian Antal, University of North Carolina School of the Arts, USA
Armin Chodzinski, Hamburg
Prof. Stewart Emerson, Hochschule für Musik 'Hanns Eisler', Berlin
Rainer Görß, Berlin
Christian Hoffmann, SpielPlan Unternehmenstheater, Berlin
Prof. Michael Hutter, WZB
Maya van Malden, Artists Anonymous, Berlin
Jörg Reckhenrich, nextmove, Berlin
Antje Schiffers, Berlin
Henrik Schrat, Berlin
Anke Strauß, Berlin
Solveig Weller, WZB

Background for the day:

In March 2008 we launched the research unit “Cultural Sources of Newness” at the WZB, under the directorship of Michael Hutter. Within this unit I took the responsibility of developing a research stream on “Artistic Interventions in Organisations,” building on my past studies on organizational learning and innovation processes, and the relationship between business and society.

My work in executive education over the past 15 years had shown me the power of the arts in management development, and books such as Lotte Darsø’s groundbreaking study *Artful Creation*, Martin Ferro-Thomsen’s thesis on *Organisational Art*, and Rob Austen’s book *Artful Making*, describe different ways of bringing artists and the arts into organizations. Colleagues from universities and business schools had recently organized sessions at conferences to report (usually enthusiastically) about their experiments with arts in their courses. So there is at least anecdotal evidence that decision makers in companies and other organizations are seeking new ways of understanding and dealing with the scope and speed of change in society today. It seems, for example, that people are looking towards the arts because the ideas and practices from the world of theater, music, painting, dance and literature offer forms of expression and ways of addressing conflicts that are very different from the communication practices and ways of working in business and public administration. The (often implicit) underlying assumptions are that by bringing the arts into such organizations, it becomes possible to challenge accepted approaches and procedures; the very “strangeness” of the arts gives them the power to irritate routines, stimulate new ideas, and open people to thinking and behaving differently—thereby possibly leading to new strategies, processes and products.

What I missed in the literature were the voices of the artists themselves—why do they engage with the world of business or public administration? What motivates them to bring their perspectives and skills into the “foreign” world of business? Some insights were shared via the Internet in the lively virtual community of artists and academics interested in arts in society and organizations, AACORN, but this did not satisfy my need to see and hear artists talking about their different experiences with artistic interventions in organizations, their aspirations, and their concerns. I sensed that, rather than conducting a series of expert interviews, a day with a mixed group of artists who were curious about each other and about the potential value of engaging with social sciences would be a powerful learning vehicle, allowing differences of views to be aired face-to-face.

Berlin, with its large and diverse arts scene is of course a particularly good place to organize such a Conversation with artists. Jörg Reckhenrich, the first artist I discussed the idea with, was immediately interested and supportive. He was an enormous help in bringing together a good mix of participants. The other artist I discussed the project with was Henrik Schrat, who advised me on how to lead the Conversation. I had mistakenly assumed that artists would resent the kind of active facilitation I am accustomed to in business meetings, but he stressed that artists would want some kind of clear output at the end of the day, so he recommended that I should lead actively and track the development of ideas visually.

Process:

After a very brief round of introductions, I presented some concepts from the literature about arts-in-business, illustrating the range of different reasons for bringing artists into organizations. After pinning these concepts onto large Metaplan boards, I asked the artists to expand on their initial introductions to talk about their work in organizations and position their roles and activities on the conceptual map I had presented. We returned to the map over the day, I wrote points that emerged during the Conversation onto large cards that I then added to this map and to other pin boards. We also used flip charts to capture ideas and decide what to focus the Conversation on. We took photographs of the boards and Ian Antal typed the flow of the Conversation into the computer as fast as possible throughout the day. The two other social scientists who attended, Anke Strauß and Solveig Weller, also took notes.

What we talked about:

The introductions and mapping process showed that we had a group of professional artists in the room who work with diverse art forms. They had formal training in the arts (e.g., music, painting, or theatre) and several had pursued further degrees in other fields, such as systemic consulting, teaching credentials, or doctorates in the social sciences. The types of interventions they had experienced differed widely: some led workshops of 1-4 hours embedded in corporate programs designed to stimulate management development or to support an organizational development process; others engaged over months in projects that they designed for or with an organization. The artists worked on some projects with consultants or academics, some worked with other artists, while others worked alone. Their interventions in organisations had entailed different roles, ranging from “artist”, “artist in residence”, or “consultant”, and some added that they saw themselves as a “Trojan

Horse” or “anthropologist”. They resented and resisted the role that they were sometimes assigned in organisations, namely “entertainer”. By contrast, they valued the special position of the “artist as outsider” because it enables them to open spaces in which the normal decision making criteria for projects in organisations can be challenged, changed or dropped.

The Conversation revealed that artists have quite different motivations for engaging with organisations. For some, working in an organisation offers material for their artistic work but the effects the intervention may have on members of the organisation do not interest them particularly. By contrast, other artists not only see interactions with organisations as a creative resource, they also want to influence the organisation and they emphasize the particular design competences that artists have. For yet other artists the interaction with people is the central objective of their work and organisations represent the space in which they can have an impact. These artists consider that an intervention has been successful if, for example, employees feel that participating in a workshop with actors or musicians has freed them from fears and permitted them to address topics that were hitherto taboo in their organisation. Another artist countered that “What I care about is generating political attention; I have absolutely no interest in being a ‘corporate therapist.’” Several participants emphasized that an important role of the arts in society is to reflect critically on social conditions and they see themselves as having the necessary skills to play an active part in “shaping social systems.” (The financial attractiveness of artistic interventions in organizations was notably absent in this discussion.)

There was some controversy among the participating artists about the boundaries between arts and creative inputs in organisation, as well as between the role of the artist and the role of the consultant. Some participants see a clear line of demarcation between art, which orients itself to the standards of the art world, and consulting, which is a service. They stressed that when an artist engages in an intervention, he or she must be absolutely clear which of the two types of activity it is. A clear economic and legal indicator of this difference is the value added tax in Germany, which is 19 percent for consulting services and 7 percent for artistic work. This difference is also socially relevant because when employers pay a contract with 7 percent value added tax they must also contribute to the special social security fund for artists (Künstlersozialkasse). Several participants argued that, while it is important to understand the difference, in practice the boundary is permeable or bridgeable, which is precisely the purpose of their interventions in organizations. Others pointed out that no matter how artists define themselves, employees in these organizations have their own views and will attribute the label “artist” if that is how they see them. A few participants added another aspect to this question of boundaries that they had experienced as difficult: artists who do not intervene in organizations can be harsh in their criticism of colleagues who engage with the world of business. There was general agreement that it is very important for researchers in this area to be conscious of these differences and to be explicit about their standpoint. Another heated discussion broke out among the artists about the artistic value and nature of artistic interventions. For example, is a project idea still art if the idea is used again in another intervention? After staking out positions and expressing strong judgements the artists put aside the simple distinction between “unique” vs “copy” in favor of a position whereby “the artist defines a project as art as long as his or her curiosity has not been satisfied.”

The Conversation then centered around the questions “How does art organise knowledge, experience, consciousness? How does knowledge become legible, and who can read it?” In order to address these questions the participants described their experiences in different projects. For example, one artist explained her ethnographic approach to artwork in organisations. She sought to uncover the “secret” knowledge of a consulting company by offering herself as a business for consultants to advise. This permitted her to learn how such a company thinks and works. Another project focused on capturing and representing the knowledge of a community’s past in order to save it from extinction. A third participant described how he had worked in a company to help the managers make values visible and discussable by carving them into a sculpture. Some of the participants were critical that companies tend to involve artists only in a limited part of the process despite the fact that they have expertise in design and social systems. They felt that it is problematic that arts are often used to open the organisation for generating ideas but other experts (e.g., professors from business schools or consultants) are brought in to make sense of and to implement the ideas and to support the learning and change processes in the organization. One of the artists therefore now insists that his role include participating in the whole process when he negotiates a contract with a client.

Conclusion:

The Artful Conversations will continue! The artists expressed great interest in the perspectives and working methods of the social sciences and welcomed the opportunity in this kind of mixed group to explore questions they would not necessarily pose themselves. Topics for future Artful Conversations include: What is the value added of an intervention designed by artists over one designed by consultants? How do power differences affect artistic interventions—and how do such interventions affect power relations in organizations? What are the dark sides of artistic interventions and how do the various stakeholders perceive and deal with them? How sustainable are the effects of artistic interventions? And how can their impacts be documented appropriately?

In order to understand the dynamics of artistic interventions we are seeking out multiple voices. To

complement the Artful Conversations with artists, we will also organize them with consultants, managers, and other stakeholders who have experience with artistic interventions. Questions to explore in these Conversations would overlap with those indicated above and they would also include others, such as: How do artistic interventions compare with other kinds of interventions that engage multiple senses (e.g., survival trainings)? Which kinds of processes need to accompany artistic interventions in order for the effects to be sustainable? For which phases of organizational learning and innovation do artistic interventions seem most valuable?

The Artful Conversations are one activity in the research stream on artistic interventions in organizations. The core of the research are case studies and action research projects, designed to generate insights into the processes and outcomes, the dilemmas and the opportunities perceived by the diverse groups of people involved.

For a description of the research stream within which these Artful Conversations are embedded go to http://www.wzb.eu/gwd/kneu/interventions_and_inventions.en.htm

