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Research on Artistic Interventions: A Learning Opportunity for Museums

Ariane Berthoin Antal

Since 2007, I have had the privilege of studying artistic interventions in all kinds of organisations around Europe. The research has enabled me to listen to employees, managers, artists and intermediaries describe their experiences: what they hoped or feared before an intervention and then what they valued in what actually happened. Their observations have also helped me identify the conditions that promote or hinder the process of learning with artistic interventions in organisations. This short essay presents some of the key learning points from this research and reflects on their implications for museums.

Artistic interventions are a multifaceted phenomenon that I define as processes bringing people, practices or products from the world of the arts into the world of organisations. An artistic intervention in the social and physical context of an organisation stimulates the interruption of routine, the suspension of assumptions and the opening of spaces in which to try out new ways of seeing, thinking and doing. Artistic interventions can last from a few hours to several years; they entail varying degrees of participation by members of the organisation, and more or less organised individual and collective reflection about the experience. Most of the artistic interventions in my sample focused on addressing an organisational issue with artistic practices; some involved creating art *in situ*.

Before embarking on my research programme, I sensed that the artists, managers and employees might have different expectations from artistic interventions. Identifying these objectives from the outset is relevant for understanding how participants assess the experience later. When a misleading assumption of shared objectives underlies an evaluation and when standard measures are applied to innovative projects, the research results are likely to be distorted and incomplete. I therefore designed a multipronged research approach that combined individual and group interviews, onsite observation and Web-based surveys. By enabling the participants to share their thoughts and feelings in their own words, rather than imposing on them the categories and language of business or academia, I could learn what mattered to them.

A first finding from the data is that stakeholders (i.e., the managers, artists and employees) do indeed have different reasons for – and initial responses to – engaging in artistic interventions. Managers who invite the arts into their organisation often have the objective of stimulating ideas for new products, services or processes; others want to develop individual or collective competence, such as communication, leadership or creativity; some also want to support a process of organisational development. A few managers indicated that they did not have a specific objective, they were just curious to see what might happen.

Artists working in all kinds of art forms and using diverse media have engaged in artistic interventions in organisations. Their motivations for undertaking such projects range from wanting to experiment with their ideas outside the art world, to work with an organisation's special materials and spaces, to help make organisations better places to work, to influence society and to access another source of income.



The majority of artists' responses contained the word "learn", often expressing a desire to learn with the people they would meet in the organisation.

Employees have mixed feelings and are often somewhat sceptical of the managerial decision to engage an artist. Some responded that they were unsure of what the artist would expect of them and feared they might be required to express themselves artistically. Some were unclear about the relevance of such a project for the organisation and particularly what connections might exist between their realm of activity and that of the artist, so they were concerned that it could be, "a waste of their time", especially when they were, "already under pressure at work". Other employees were curious and confident that something interesting would happen.

These findings from the pre-experience interviews and Web-based surveys show that when artists enter organisations to embark on a project the space is full of diverse expectations and emotions, although every participant assumes that his or her own perspective is shared by the others. Given these disparate points of departure, what actually happens during artistic interventions and what is it that people value about such experiences?

Every artistic intervention is unique; there is no standard operating procedure. Sometimes the plan is developed between the project owner and the artist; in other cases, employees participate in designing the process with the artist. The process usually entails an initial period of artistic research during which time the artist explores the "foreign" context of the organisation. The physical and social space, with its own language, values, rules, taboos, routines and objects, provides the material to which the artists respond with their artform.

A feature common across the many kinds of artistic interventions is the process of opening an "interspace" in which the usual norms embedded in the organisational culture are temporarily suspended, thereby offering the possibility of engaging with ideas, each other and materials in various ways, be it playfully, provocatively, earnestly, creatively or humorously. Artists can invite participants – and in museums this includes the visitors – to activate "bodily ways of knowing" rather than focusing only on cognitive approaches to learning. They do not hesitate to draw on the full range of aesthetic possibilities in order to arouse people's senses and challenge them to explore new possibilities. Some experiences may be pleasurable discoveries, and some may also be associated with anger, frustration or discomfort. By taking people out of their comfort zone, artistic interventions have the potential to unfreeze engrained ways of thinking and doing and expand the repertoire of potential responses to a given situation.

Three aspects of artists' ways of working struck me as being particularly significant for organisations today: managers and employees who engage with artists have the opportunity to observe and experience how to combine inquiry with action, make not-knowing generative, and treat all kinds of responses as energy. Firstly, whereas in academia the emphasis is on inquiry and analysis, and in the corporate world it is on action, artists overcame this duality by interweaving trying-out, reflecting and conceptualising. Secondly, people in organisations are trained *to know* and they consider *not-knowing* to be a sign of ignorance or incompetence, a gap which they either try to hide or correct.

By contrast, most of the artists in my study treated not-knowing as a condition for generating newness, so they stayed with it in order to allow something fresh to emerge. Thirdly, whereas resistance is usually considered to be problematic in organisations, artists tended to see it as a signal that there was energy in the space with which they could engage as a resource.

The research also helps dismiss a widespread misconception, namely, the expectation that artists are ideally suited to inject creativity into organisations. This notion is based on a twofold problematic assumption: artists are suppliers and creativity can be commodified. The data analysis shows a different dynamic in practice. Artists can unleash the creative potential that is present, individually and collectively, in an organisation. The process can be triggered in conversations before the interspace is opened, and it can be stimulated by exercises within the interspace.

A significant part of how an artistic intervention “works” happens beyond the interspace. Firstly, such unusual experiences require sense-making processes, individually and collectively. Spontaneous conversations with the artist and among colleagues were often mentioned as moments of sense-making. Oral and written communication with management also contributed to clarifying how the initiative related to other processes within the organisation. Furthermore, when participants had the opportunity to apply the new ideas generated in the interspace, or when management picked up on these suggestions, they saw that their experimental efforts were worth pursuing in some form and the process had been more than mere show. Additionally, the presence of artefacts resulting from the artistic intervention served to stimulate conversations about the memorable moments during the intervention and their meaning. Follow-up research a few years later, in a case where artefacts remained visible, revealed that meaning may change over time but the continuation of conversations kept the sense formed during the original intervention alive that the organisation was capable of generating newness.

Attending to how the participants define what they value about an artistic intervention often revealed a wider range of effects than the stakeholders initially expected. Only by taking their words seriously was it possible to discover that they considered “seeing more and differently” to be one of the most important aspects of the experience. They found they could gain greater awareness of their present context, reflect on their role at work – and the role of work in their lives (often stimulated by comparing their motivation with that of artists) – and broaden their perspectives on the organisation and its environment. Working on a marketing question with an artist, for example, enabled a group to refocus from small, relatively technical problems to conceive of a far greater scope for serving the needs of the community than they had ever considered. The combination of seeing more and differently inside and outside an organisation, building more meaningful relationships and experimenting with creative ways of working laid the groundwork for enhancing the organisation’s innovative capacity.

One of the research findings that struck me most was the way managers handled the question I posed about the outcomes they valued. Some managers spoke of improvements in turnover or productivity, or a drop in absenteeism; but they were also quick to point out that establishing a direct causal link with the artistic interventions would be too simplistic.

What they emphasised instead of numbers was the evidence they observed with their own eyes and ears when they walked around the organisation, such as noting how some employees showed personal growth and how there was collective energy for new projects. In other words, they used their physical senses to capture the value rather than relying on formal measurement categories. It is for this reason that I coined the term “values-added”, which captures the fact that the outcomes of artistic interventions add multiple kinds of value, especially socially-relevant values, beyond what can be measured in economic terms.

And what of the artists? What kind of values-added did they appreciate in their experiences with artistic interventions in organisations? They often reported that the beginning of the process was more problematic than they had expected, particularly if their hope to embark on co-learning was not automatically shared by members of the organisation. They found that they first needed to create the conditions for such co-learning. Usually the artists quickly succeeded in gaining the participants’ trust, not only trust in them as learning partners but also in the process itself. Among the points the artists mentioned as valuable for them was the validation of their working approach and competences outside the artworld, which was not an objective they had at the outset. They gained a new perspective on how they worked, which they could then take forward again in their art. In some cases, artists developed new techniques by having access to special materials and technologies in the organisation. Almost all the artists in my research said they would recommend such projects to their peers but specified that not all artists would want to expose themselves, their practices or their work in progress to external viewers.

It is now time to disappoint two kinds of readers: those hopefuls who expect to be able to depend on reaping such values-added and those sceptics who assume this research was destined to paint a rosy picture. The outcomes documented in this research are indeed all possible – but none are guaranteed. In some organisations, a substantial number of employees reported that they did not feel any personal benefit from the artistic intervention or did not see any value in the organisation engaging with such interventions. One German employee commented, for example, “In this place, we have very different and much more important problems to address than to start supporting art here, too”. Although it was a rare response, I did also hear employees express resentment towards artists who they believed were instrumentalising them or the organisation for artistic ends. Therefore, I now turn to discussing the conditions that are more likely to enable the emergence of outcomes and the barriers that may lead to disappointment and increased cynicism at work.

Before looking into the factors within organisations that enable or hinder generative experiences in artistic interventions, it is important to distinguish between artists and more common interventionists, namely consultants. The great advantage artists have in opening interspaces lies in their foreignness; their frames of reference and identities stem from the artworld, not schools of engineering, business or law. Artists do not automatically think in managerial categories; they are not oriented to organisational norms nor are they trained in corporate terminology. These differences make it easier for them to build trust with employees than it is for most organisational consultants who are engaged by the management to stimulate change or impart knowledge.

An essential precondition for an organisation to benefit from an artistic intervention is that the participating individuals feel they can, in some way, benefit personally from the experience. This, in turn, entails other preconditions. For an artistic intervention to “work” people have to engage with each other and the process; and for this to happen, people need to feel safe. Challenging established norms and trying out new ideas and behaviours involve taking risks; people may feel incompetent for the new approach and the experiment might not work out. If the employees or the artist do not feel safe, they are unlikely to open themselves to the unexpected and nothing significantly new is likely to emerge. Within these conditions of safety, the failure of an experiment becomes a resource; it offers a puzzle upon which to reflect, an experience upon which to build. Unfortunately, such an attitude towards failure is countercultural to organisations in which short-term wins are the basis for making a good impression. Fortunately, artists have found that they can improve the situation by developing a stance of co-learning within an interspace with employees when it is not already present from the outset. However, the manner in which the experience is treated afterwards is beyond their sphere of influence.

Therefore, leadership engagement throughout the process is another crucial enabling precondition. A detailed comparative analysis of eight cases showed that the nature of the top management’s commitment to learning themselves with and from the artistic intervention made a significant difference between generative and disappointing experiences. When top managers show an interest in the learning potential an artistic intervention offers, people at other levels of the organisation are more likely to feel that the initiative is considered important and that they can legitimately use work time to participate in it and talk about the experience. The way top management communicates about the artistic intervention and the conversations among employees about the experience are essential preconditions for making sense of the various ideas, the mix of feelings and the unexpected possibilities that are explored in the interspace.

Several barriers to benefitting from artistic interventions emerged from my research as well: instrumentalisation, lack of follow-up and an attitude of knowing. Firstly, if employees or the artist feel instrumentalised they are unlikely to engage energetically and openly in the process. They may “go through the motions”, attend sessions and participate in exercises, but they will do so without the spirit of personal engagement on which the generativity of an artistic intervention depends. Secondly, if people have invested themselves in a process but have no space to act upon the ideas afterwards, or see no indication that the initiatives they have suggested are taken seriously by management, there is a high risk that cynicism will flourish within the organisation, undermining all that may have been achieved in the interspace. Thirdly, if managers, employees or artists embark on an artistic intervention without a keen sense of curiosity paired with humility, they are unlikely to discover anything worthwhile from the experience. This finding may sound obvious, but it needs to be taken seriously because the risk is pervasive in organisational contexts that prize knowing and penalise not-knowing. Perhaps logically, and yet perversely, such a risk is particularly high in knowledge-intensive organisations such as museums.

Museums are a distinct kind of organisation whose *raison d’être* differs from that of the other organisations in my research programme. They preserve and present artefacts; they generate and diffuse knowledge about these artefacts and the physical and social contexts from which they originated.

Museums have longstanding traditions and roles in society, and they are more established than all the companies in my sample. However, in light of the multiple social and technological changes in society today – such as the “digital revolution”, the “knowledge society” or the “experience economy” – many museums are seeking to reinvent themselves, and curators are likewise redefining their roles. Developing the capacity to learn and innovate has thus become more important for museums than ever before.

Artistic interventions are one way of stimulating organisational learning and innovation. Engaging with artists, as the Museum für Naturkunde Berlin has been doing (and other museums such as the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D.C., and the Musée de la chasse et de la nature in Paris), offers many opportunities to discover and try out new ways of seeing and doing things. These are just first steps. The question is of course: what next? It will be intriguing to follow what the Museum für Naturkunde Berlin does with its experience so that the energy and time people poured into the process, the risks they took, the ideas they developed and the hopes and concerns they expressed are advanced in a meaningful way. How will other museums build on the artistic intervention experiences that this museum and other kinds of organisations have had so as to enhance their capacity for innovation in ways that make sense to them?

Most importantly, will working with artists who cross the boundaries between the world of organisations and the world of the arts help museums develop alternatives to the current dominant logic of the “audit society”, “new public management” and the “neo-liberal agenda”, which are imposing narrow, short-term performance measures on organisations in all spheres of society? These are challenges for courageous and visionary people in museums to address: the project owners whose vision and personal interactions shape the conditions for the artistic intervention, the employees who engage in co-learning with the artists at work and the top managers who communicate about the sense and significance of the initiative with internal and external stakeholders.

Partnering with researchers to observe and reflect on the artistic interventions within the organisation is a way to support the learning process. Future projects could improve on the research design I have used, for example, by including more voices. Fortunately, the Museum für Naturkunde Berlin gained insights into visitors’ perspectives by working with Lernkultur. Accompanying an intervention with formative evaluation research provides members of the organisation with a basis for reflection upon action from which to learn throughout the life-span of an intervention (instead of waiting until the end of the process to assess its outcome). The crucial question is: Who needs to learn in order for an organisation to learn from the research? As the founders of the field of organisational learning, Chris Argyris and Donald Schön pointed out, obviously the organisation itself cannot learn; it is the individual and collective task of human actors at all levels to learn. Given the heavy workloads typical within organisational life today, strong signals from top management, especially in the form of role modelling, are essential for organisational learning to be taken seriously. It is to be hoped that museums are recruiting more learning-hungry leaders who are willing to discover with artists how to combine inquiry with action so that their organisations are vibrant contributors to the societies that host them.

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