



[me@ferro.dk](mailto:me@ferro.dk)  
[www.ferro.dk](http://www.ferro.dk)

**MARTIN FERRO-THOMSEN**

## **CHANGE THROUGH EXCHANGE: ORGANISATIONAL ART AND LEARNING**

Published in *Sophisticated Survival Techniques. Strategies in Art and Economy. Product and Vision - Reader* (ed. Brellocks and Schrat), Kulturverlag Kadmos, Berlin 2005, p. 182-197, ISBN 3-86599-009-6 ([www.produktundvision.com](http://www.produktundvision.com))

If art is to enter an organisational environment on a long-term project-basis, with mutual benefit for artists and employees/management, then it should make sense to apply both art theory and organisational theory to such an art project. In this essay I will attempt to substantiate this contention by using prevalent organisational theory to try to understand the cultural processes of art and exchange in a large art/organisation project. I will then zoom out from this project to present some more universal reflections about art and organisation together with a useful remix of pinpoint theoretical samples<sup>1</sup>.

As an ideal case, I will bring into play the art/organisation project ›Industries of Vision‹ (IOV) by Danish artist Kent Hansen (democratic innovation) together with artists/groups Superflex, N55, and Joachim Hamou, two manufacturing companies and some intermediaries<sup>2</sup>.

### **THE ART OF LEARNING**

In the art world, workplace consultancy sometimes has a poor reputation – most likely due to the instrumental application of preconceived consultancy schemes that often fail to appreciate an organisation's underlying cultural layer. In contrast, Edgar Schein's Process Consultation (PC)<sup>3</sup> concludes the other way around: Joint cultural diagnosis together with core groups in the organisation develops some form of action that aims to anchor self-sustaining learning through newly acquired diagnostics skills passed on by the process consultant (cf. ›double-loop learning‹, that is, learning how to learn).

Let us look at the basic concepts behind the PC methodology, or ›philosophy‹ as Schein in all fairness calls it, where the consultant is considered a ›helper‹ and the consultant-organisation relationship is dubbed ›The Helping Relationship.‹ A rather charming aspect of PC is that it universally applies to dissimilar types of clients (a girlfriend, a government, a garage) and this is perhaps one of the reasons why it makes sense to introduce this theory in an art context.

---

<sup>1</sup> This article is based on a recent publication: *Organisational Art: A Study of Art at Work in Organisations*, Martin Ferro-Thomsen, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Martin Ferro-Thomsen, 2005 for in-depth analysis of IOV.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Edgar Schein, 1999.

The main assumption behind PC is that one can only help a human system to help itself. This is effectively done by involving the client in a period of joint diagnosis. Since neither the client nor the consultant knows enough at this early point of initial contact to define the needed expertise, it is important for the consultant to »access his ignorance,« as Schein calls it, of the organisational reality. Simultaneously, the client will gradually learn for himself how to diagnose; a crucial point as »problems will stay longer solved and be solved more effectively if the organization learns to solve those problems itself«<sup>4</sup>. One important means of passing on diagnostics skills is creating a »communication channel«. This may sound obvious, but often the client is unlikely to give away the right information, or will hide self-damaging details. This leads to false diagnosis on the part of the consultant and a natural reluctance to follow the prescribed actions on the part of the client.

In »Industries of Vision« (IOV), the very approach taken on by the artists was based on both active inquiry<sup>5</sup> and dialogue<sup>6</sup>, where the artists were »accessing their ignorance« of the organisational corporeity. By nature, there is a difference between »just« introducing readymade artworks in an organisation and introducing actual artists who are to facilitate an artistic process where organisational matter serves as subject matter and employees participate as co-creators. The level of the non-artist participant's engagement grows with the level of relevance and ownership that the art project promises. In turn, this engagement furthers the chance that employees will share thoughts, ideas, and dreams more openly than it could be expected in any other case.

Not many artists consider themselves consultants. The concept of »helping« would be more acceptable to most artists, although not at any price and certainly not in any context. One major difference between (stereotypical) consultancy and art is that the former tends to focus on problems – often demonstrated in the very articulation (»diagnosis«, »prescription«, »cure«, etc.) – whereas art tends to focus on possibilities.

In IOV, the artists were not engaged directly to solve problems. On the contrary, the project was an experiment from beginning to end (as most art is). If we are to stay in the rather untimely rhetoric of medicine, then one could say that the artists worked like some scientists do within experimental medicine: exploring opportunities, finding new material, combining disciplines and competencies in an attempt to discover a potential cure, a drug or a tool, that might cure diseases yet to be found.

To do so, the artists in IOV made tabula rasa. On the first day of the active part of the project with employees and managers, the artists asked »Now that we finally are here, what should we do?« By posing this question, the artists created a void of in principle unlimited possibilities (similar to a »blank canvas«) – in reality limited by the composite cognitive fabric of the unlike co-creators. This was the first step in setting up a communication channel, which was

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 1999, p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> »Active inquiry is more than good listening. It involves understanding the psychological dynamics involved when someone seeks help and understanding the impact of different kinds of questions on the mental and emotional process of the client« (ibid., p. 59).

<sup>6</sup> »Dialogue can be thought of as a form of conversation that makes it possible, even likely, for participants to become aware of some of the hidden and tacit assumptions that derive from our cultural learning, our language, and our psychological makeup« (ibid., p. 201).

followed by several other incentives, such as workshops, a project day for the whole factory, cooperative creation around artefacts or concepts, discussions etc.

It is a fact that some artists at times choose not to work under the title ›artist‹. The word simply causes too much confusion based on outdated art appreciations when working with unbiased non-artists outside traditional art contexts. Instead they choose a mainstream equivalent when articulating their role, such as ›designer‹ or ›project manager‹. Already back in the 1960s the artist John Latham coined the terms ›Conceptual Engineer‹ and notably ›Incidental Person‹ to circumvent laymen's false art appreciations.

However, it is also a fact that calling something art and someone an artist may also have positive connotations. In IOV, the artists were never considered or presented as anything other than artists. To the employees, art meant something along the lines of wild, crazy, and fun, which in turn gave the artists tremendous leeway.

Naturally there were still noise and frustration at play due to the differing art appreciations, worldviews, and the natural lack of common ground and language. But the somewhat paradoxical combination of the will to do something and the frustration connected with doing it is often an ideal outset for an intense and effective learning experience. This case was no exception. By working and interacting with the artists, the ›blue collars‹ accessed their ignorance of contemporary art while simultaneously learning more about it than most people ever will – methods and ways of life so different from the average shop-floor reality that inspiration and learning were inevitable outcomes of the process.

An example: One of the principles of IOV was to create solely from customary factory material to manifest the ideas and concepts that emerged during the project. Suddenly ordinary parts from the production would enter into the artistic process as components from which to build. This was a concept that inspired creativity on the part of the employees and at the same time established it as a legitimate resource of daily performance.

One such manifestation was ›The Wise Oak‹, a ›tree house‹ of sorts, which originated from the need for a meeting room but transpired to encompass basically all the articulated needs of the core employee group in one of the factories. It featured an in-house radio station, sound-proof walls, and several communication concepts and served as a meeting room, archive, and storage room. This space can be described along the lines of a ›heterotopia<sup>7</sup>, a free space in the organisation that allows for cultural plurality and representation that would normally be suppressed by the dominant mainstream culture – in this case the managerial discourse and practice. Those who have worked at a factory (as I have) know that not all democratic rights and developments are maintained or mirrored in the organisational reality from nine to five. To this end, a concept such as ›The Wise Oak‹ could be part of a ›cure‹; that is, some form of harmonisation-tool that would attune the organisational reality to democratic developments ›outside‹.

As suggested, this concept came about by focusing on possibilities rather than problems. In the organisational studies discourse, this is known as »Appreciative Inquiry«:

---

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Michel Foucault, 1967.

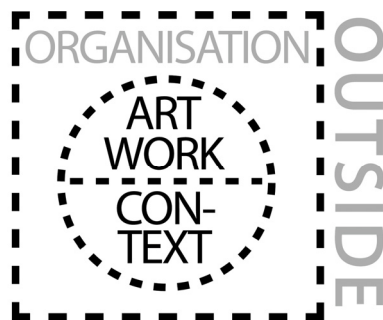
»Appreciative Inquiry [AI] is a method to transform the capacity of human systems for positive change by deliberately focusing on positive experiences and hopeful futures. [...] AI claims that organizations are not problems to be solved but are centers of infinite relational capacity, alive with infinite imagination, open, indeterminate, and ultimately – in terms of the future – a mystery.«<sup>8</sup>

A positive future does not have to be utopian, in the sense ›unreachable‹ or ›illusory‹. Certainly, imagining utopia in a local context adds energy and value to the near and immediate. Here lies a great deal of the strength of IOV as both an art and development project.

## **RIDGE-WALKING TOWARDS EX-CHANGE**

Let us step back from IOV and look more generally at art projects in organisations, which I call ›Organisational Art‹ (OA). This is a term that designates art projects by contemporary artists, who work together with non-artistic organisations (such as companies, institutions, communities, governments, and NGOs) to produce art that in one way or another evolves around organisational issues – as we saw with IOV. Other artists/groups include Artist Placement Group, Henrik Schrat, and Local Access. OA can be characterised as socially engaged, conceptual, discursive, site-specific, and contextual<sup>9</sup>.

In the 1960s John Latham and Artist Placement Group coined the perhaps most influential artists' axiom for today's interdisciplinary art, »The context is half the work«. But in fact, the relation between context and the work is often interdependent and dynamic, as work itself might become context and vice versa. Furthermore, there are several types of context at play in OA projects, outlined in the following figure:



The first level (the circle) is the art project itself that involves parts of the organisation (participants and subject matter). At the second level (the square) is the organisation as such, where large parts may be left entirely untouched by the project. The third level is ›outside‹ the organisation and/or the project. It may be concrete, such as the local environment in which the organisation is embedded, or it may be more abstract as ›the manufacturing industry‹, ›the private sector‹, or ›the society‹. I have shown the divisions as dotted lines to illustrate that to a large extent the boundaries are imaginary, social, or institutional and that interaction/exchange goes on across them constantly.

---

<sup>8</sup> David Grant et. al. (eds.), 2004, p. 55.

<sup>9</sup> A complete framework for OA can be found in Martin Ferro-Thomsen, 2005.

Another irrefutable context is the art institution<sup>10</sup> and its discourse, which, formally, may have existed ›outside‹ but in reality is present on all levels by virtue of the artist. Even for the most dismissive art practice that actively tries to evade the art institution, it is present as ›positive absence‹, imposing its influence negatively through the artist's attempt to avoid them.

For an OA project that works directly with context, the site is of crucial importance. But site is more than just a certain place. As Miwon Kwon argues, the concept of site in art has undergone a shift from meaning ›actual place‹, to »a discursive vector-ungrounded, fluid, virtual«.<sup>11</sup> Kwon operates with three competing paradigms in her definition of site: phenomenological, social/institutional and discursive. IOV, as we saw, works with all three: The physical space and found material in the organisation, the social and institutional dispositions of the factories and its employees, and, finally, the discursive potential of the organisational corporeity.

This advanced idea of site renders any organisational site a potential ›slice of life‹ that might be learned from. OA crystallises organisational matter and issues, transforms them and disseminates them in a more universal way. Kwon puts it this way:

»[...] current forms of site-oriented art, which readily take up social issues (often inspired by them), and which routinely engage the collaborative participation of audience groups for the conceptualization and production of the work, are seen as a means to strengthen art's capacity to penetrate the socio-political organization of contemporary life with greater impact and meaning.«<sup>12</sup>

Inviting participants/audience to collaborate, as OA does, is particularly effective; the participants in the organisation work with issues from (and for) their own everyday lives, enhancing identification, engagement and ownership. And it is through art's many and diverse networks and interfaces that learning, narratives, and statements are transferred from a local context to a more universal one – which in turn resonance back into the organisation.

By engaging a well-defined audience directly in its natural organisation, OA avoids the ›segregation‹ of the institutional spaces of art (the studio, the gallery, the museum), where mainly art lovers and biased experts set foot. This issue has been commented on in relation to the influential Relational Aesthetics by Nicolas Bourriaud, who described certain art works as democratic – but in reality those works were only perceived this way by a relatively small number of casual gallery visitors, which hardly made it up for a general public<sup>13</sup>.

But by moving the place of art, OA artists risk losing institutional standing. Since the art institution at all times represent the central locus of power in the cultural field, this exercise might restrict the artistic latitude if continued. Furthermore, OA has been criticised for compromising art's hard-earned autonomy, which has been viewed as the

---

<sup>10</sup> »The concept of ›art as institution‹ [...] refers to the productive and distributive apparatus and also to the ideas of art that prevail at a given time and that determine the reception of works« (Peter Bürger, 1984, p. 22).

<sup>11</sup> Miwon Kwon, 2002.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>13</sup> See Claire Bishop, 2004.

single most important prerequisite for artistic freedom. However, absolute autonomy has become a straightjacket to many artists, separating them from real influence on the »praxis of life« as Peter Bürger calls it.<sup>14</sup>

This dilemma has led OA artists to search for a certain balance with one foot inside the art institution and one outside. This might be called »ridge-walking«<sup>15</sup>. The ridge-walking artist sees potential in keeping his free creational spaces for seminal art activities and research. However, he also needs effective platforms for exchange with society with less troublesome mediation and disturbing intermediaries from the art institution. By moving back and forth across the boundaries of the art institution, the artist gradually advances the space of what is possible and generally accepted. Instead of trying to subvert the institution, he has learned more subtle ways of navigation which acknowledge the mutual interdependence<sup>16</sup>.

Hence, in the future, we will witness still more ridge-walking among contemporary artists aiming to facilitate real and sustainable change through exchange.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

- BÜRGER, PETER, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Minnesota 1984, translated from *Theorie der Avantgarde*, Frankfurt a. M. 1974
- BÜRGER, PETER, »Der Avantgardist nach dem Ende der Avantgarden: Joseph Beuys«, in: Peter Bürger, *Das Altern der Moderne*, Frankfurt 2001
- BISHOP, CLAIRE, »Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics«, in: *OCTOBER Magazine*, fall, pp. 51–79, MIT Press 2004
- FERRO-THOMSON, MARTIN, *Organisational Art: A Study of Art at Work in Organisations*, 2005, ISBN: 87-91337-43-7, available from [www.ferro.dk](http://www.ferro.dk)
- FOUCAULT, MICHEL, »Of other spaces«, lecture from 1967, first published by the French journal *Architecture /Mouvement/ Continuité* in October 1984. English online version available from <http://foucault.info>
- GRANT, DAVID et. al. (eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Organisational Discourse*, Sage Publications Ltd. 2004
- KWON, MIWON, *One place after another – Site-specific art and locational identity*, The MIT Press 2002
- SCHEIN, EDGAR, *Process Consultation Revisited: Building the Helping Relationship*, Addison Wesley Publishing Company 1999

---

<sup>14</sup> Peter Bürger, 1984.

<sup>15</sup> Inspired by an article by Peter Bürger (2001), where he describes Joseph Beuys as a »ridge walker« (»Grenzgänger«).

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Peter Bürger, 1984, p. 54: »One will need to ask whether a sublation of the autonomy status can be desirable at all, whether the distance between art and the praxis of life is not requisite for that free space within which alternatives to what exists become conceivable«.