

Art at work, by hand and in your heart

Contemporary artists who work with companies as subject matter and co-creators draw upon a legacy from **the political artists of the 1960's**. The artists' aim is not to serve as consultants, but to create art, but the collaboration can also lead to **innovation** and may help rid the organisations of habitual thought.

UK

Translation

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The scene is Tate Britain Art Gallery in London. The date is some time in March 2005, and after walking in the shadows for four decades, the pioneers of the Artist Placement Group are finally welcomed as the great artists that they are: The museum has recently acquired the archives from forty years of artistic labour in companies and government offices.

In the 1960's, the Artist Placement Group were among the first to step out of their studios to produce art in workplaces in accordance with their motto 'The context is half the work of art', which meant that the artists successfully included the company, and often even the individual employees, in the artistic process. The potential of this process was an increased and more unrestricted influence for the arts. The down side was that the approach led to accusations of 'dirty' art and political activism, and a resulting banishment from the hallowed halls of respectable art.

The title of the exhibition is 'Animate the Legacy'. A fitting title it seems, since a recent project at Learning Lab Denmark has amply proven that the baton has been passed on to and reinvented by new generations of artists.

Simulation

Last autumn, twenty artists, practitioners and researchers from seven nations met in a secluded place in Denmark to map out this art form, which we gave the provisional title 'Organisational Art'. At this summit, we soon found that artists all over the

world are rapidly expanding the domain of art in the social sphere. Rather than indirect and symbolic-aesthetic manifestations, the artists directly approach the reality that is the subject of their critical artistic endeavours.

The French group Access Local, for example, have developed a system, which simulates the challenges that an organisation face. In this system, which

The proper setting for art is therefore no longer restricted to the lonesome studio, the back-alley gallery or the art museum. More and more artists are equally familiar with both boardrooms and factory floors

is called 'Simulation', the organisations can simulate stressful and tumultuous situations that, were they real, might threaten the very existence of the organisation.

In the simulation, a dangerous situation is turned into a safe, but seminal learning experience, one that has led to drastic, but highly successful, strategic changes, e.g. for the French brewery Fischer. Aside from showing bottom-line results, this demonstrates that art can contribute in ways and areas that go far beyond the traditional notion of art as 'merely' an aesthetic phenomenon.

Democratic innovation

The role of art and artists today is comparable to that of any other profession: It involves a certain set of competencies, a set of rules and some practitioners. To find the romantic loner or the creative genius is, therefore, not easily done.

And yet these competencies are not fundamentally different from what you would normally associate with art: Innovative, different and cleansed of thinking in fixed patterns. The observant reader will have noted that these terms are lifted straight out of current management gospel, which may be one reason why many companies now turn to the arts for answers. Actually the new, insofar as there is anything new here, consists of the circumstances surrounding this new art form. There is a world of difference between buying a work of art and putting it up in the company headquarters and working face to face with an artist in a cross-disciplinary art project where the company provides the resources, the reputation and the subject matter.

Another example, and one of the largest projects of this kind in Denmark,

is the artist Kent Hansen and his organisation 'democratic innovation', through which he collaborated with, among others, the artist groups Superflex and N55 and the manufacturing companies LK and Basta on the art project 'Industries of Vision'.

Kent Hansen had long wondered why, at some workplaces, the workers' democratic rights are left in the wardrobe along with the overcoat. He is trained as a painter, but rather than producing a painting to express his criticism, he chose to set up a combined art- and development project where artists, employees, managers and workplace consultants collaborated in an artistic process at the two production facilities.

By placing art in the workplace, Kent Hansen established a very direct type of dialogue with the employees, a gesture far more effective than acrylic paint on a canvas in some gallery where the workers rarely come anyway. When 'Industries of Vision' was later

largely evident in collaborations between artists and corporate systems due to the lack of an established method for exchange and interaction between the artists and the organisations.

The artist, however, does more than just step into something new; he also partially takes leave of the old, the art institution; that is the galleries, the museums and the various functions that determine what constitutes art and what does not. This may be somewhat dangerous, because if an artist loses his standing in the community, is he still an artist? This was, to some degree, what happened to the Artist Placement Group. Of course, we should keep in mind that art was never a fixed idea with clearly defined objectives and means – but often the rest of the world is lagging behind the arts.

In engaging in such art projects as outlined above, an organisation stands to gain a lot, particularly in terms of learning, branding and innovation. But what is in it for the artists? As demon-

strated by the examples, the aim is certainly not to slip unnoticed into the organisation as some sort of undercover agent. The answer is quite obviously – art.

The one key requirement is, however, that the artist is able to translate his or her endeavours into the common currency of organisations; competencies, success parameters and bottom line results. This because outside the beaten path, art is by no means a natural sight yet.

Art at work
Back in Tate Britain, the no longer quite so young members of the Artist Placement Group sit alongside their younger colleagues, deeply engaged in a discussion about the relevance of art moving into the workplaces.

Also contemporary art has to compete with the media maelstrom, the advertising avalanche and the dog-wagging politics as it continues the age-old quest to improve the world in incremental steps. In this situation, it makes plenty of sense that art strike our hearts and minds alike, right there on the factory floor, in the boardroom or during the seminar, rather than being hidden away in the 'white box' of some museum. And that is why it makes sense to send art off to work – because that is where people generally are to be found.

The aim is still art

People tend to notice when art leaves the beaten path. When an artist first sets foot in a company, he must operate on the special conditions and experiences of the corporate world. The lack of a common language and background is often a major obstacle, and may lead to endless misunderstandings and frustrations between the artist and the employees. This is common in any kind of cross-disciplinary endeavour, but is often particu-

INFO_ ORGANISATIONAL ART

Organisational Art (OA) is the name of a project at Learning Lab Denmark and an art form characterised by being, among other things, conceptual, socially engaged, and site-specific. The first part of the project was recently concluded with a Master's thesis about OA; the next step is the publication of a 'Thin Book', co-authored by twenty artists, researchers and practitioners. Read more about the thesis and the forthcoming thin book at www.ild.dk/oa

Other links

www.democratic-innovation.org

www.access-local.com