

# The organisation as artist's palette: arts-based interventions

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In today's rapidly changing society, innovation is a fundamental capability of individuals and organisations compelled to keep up with the new demands of the environment. For instance, open-mindedness, original thinking, critique and flexibility as preconditions of innovation are critical resources for creating successful businesses. Scholars in innovation and organisational creativity have turned to the artistic realm, where innovation and critique are basic components and the artists serve as objects of study. Yet, much evidence shows that abstract knowledge about artistic processes may help in restructuring research and development processes and expose employees to new practices and different perspectives, while especially "creative" role models are even more effective. According to a long tradition in thinking about education represented, for example, by the German artist and art theorist [Beuys \(1975\)](#), practicing and dealing with the arts is a necessary precondition for personal development, holistic thinking and employment skills. Therefore, well-planned and thoroughly considered human resource activities using the arts can help employees acquire necessary abilities.

However, arts can be brought into firms not only as a response to new demands on individuals, but also as interventions to benefit team and organisational development, as well as external communication. Depending on the design of an organisation's engagement with the arts, it is possible to target these other goals above human resource development. Team events or a carefully thought-out artistic portrait of the organisation's identity and visions can, in particular, help facilitate change, the identification of problems or the enhancement of a sense of community. These effects are based on the understanding that the arts address ideas and problems in an aesthetic way, stimulate audiences and enhance their experiences and lead to processes of self-reflection.

Beyond discussing pragmatic ways of bringing the arts into organisations, such as using the arts in external communication, sponsoring art events or investing in artworks, as a review of arts-based interventions, this article considers the many possibilities of bringing the arts into organisations to keep up with the demands of an uncertain and fast-changing environment. In the following section, cases of arts-based interventions in companies will reflect the different "kinds" of arts-based interventions that can be found in the literature. Yet, it is not possible to copy such interventions accurately and reach the same goals in different organisational settings. Practitioners therefore need to understand the basic underlying principles of arts-based interventions to develop arts-based interventions to address the needs of their companies.

The sources for this concept were collected in a systematic review of arts-based interventions, which followed a structured review protocol, applying explicit strategies for selecting relevant literature. The search in English and German databases revealed 119 publications, of which the majority are empirical and case-based, often focusing on just one

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arts-based intervention in one company. These cases were in publications ranging from diverse books and practitioners' literature to state-of-the-art academic journals.

The categorisation of the cases followed certain guidelines to stay true to the original observation on the one hand, and to organise and interpret data efficiently on the other hand. First, the cases were sorted by descriptions of different methods that organisations use to bring elements from the art world into the organisational realm. This step led to a list of 12 “kinds” of arts-based interventions; to these, new published cases can easily be added. Second, this approach was complemented by identifying patterns, commonalities and differences. The current repertoire of arts-based interventions can be understood as creating organisational influence through the import of artworks, artistic capabilities or art practices as metaphors.

### Possibilities for bringing art into organisations

Technically speaking, each kind of arts-based intervention is a category that represents a set of similar and exemplary cases documented in the literature. The following overview demonstrates 12 “techniques” by which the arts have been brought into organisations in the past:

1. *Provide Tickets for Art Events:* Companies give tickets for public art events (e.g. theatre performances, concerts and art shows) to various stakeholders or most often to employees as incentive. This is also done for inspirational and educational reasons, providing employees with opportunities to experience art. For instance, as part of the corporate art programme Catalyst, Unilever offered its employees tickets for selected art events, including contemporary theatre plays and exhibitions which the Catalyst team considered beneficial yet challenging experiences that employees were likely to miss without their intervention (Darsø, 2004).
2. *Organise Art Events:* Companies engage in organising, staging and hosting art events that are either restricted to invited organisational audiences or open to the public. For instance, Mercedes-Benz Center, Stuttgart, regularly organises both private and public art events in the main car exhibition building (including hip-hop concerts, stand-up comedy, private views of local visual artists' works and the Haydn Symphony Orchestra performing all 107 Haydn symphonies; Blanke, 2002).
3. *Sponsor Art Events, Artists or Art Institutions:* Companies engage in art or cultural sponsoring as part of their marketing and social responsibility activities. Basically, the practice of art sponsoring has been known since the Renaissance: to instil a sense of dignity and success, trade dynasties like the House of Medici hired artists to produce impressive artworks and paint coats of arms on buildings they owned or sponsored (e.g. churches). Similarly, today's companies support artists, art events, or art institutions in exchange for having their name and logo displayed on artistic publications, on posters announcing art events, in arts buildings (e.g. museums and concert halls) or even on the stage (Blanke, 2002). For instance, all German manufacturers of premium cars (BMW, Mercedes-Benz, Volkswagen and Audi) sponsor “highbrow” cultural events (e.g. classical music festivals and contemporary art exhibitions and museums; Schwaiger *et al.*, 2010).
4. *Buy and Collect Artworks:* Companies buy selected artworks or systematically build corporate collections. For example, the EA-Generali Foundation in Vienna, a

foundation of the Austrian insurance company Generali, collects artworks (predominantly work by Austrian artists and paper drawings) and organises exhibitions within a company-owned museum. Renowned artist Andrea Fraser was hired to create events that bring employees in closer contact with the company-owned artworks (Fraser, 1995).

5. *Commission Artworks*: Companies commission artworks, often in connection with a specific event. Mercedes-Benz, for instance, asked Andy Warhol to produce artworks for the company's 100th anniversary. He chose a series of visually remarkable Mercedes cars for an artistic statement on the company's history (Becker, 1994). Similarly, Siemens purchased *Farbfeld 845/91*, a monochrome shrill red painting by Ruprecht Geiger that measures 1.2 by 7.5 metres, and mounted it in the main staff restaurant at its headquarters in Munich during a major reorganisation of the company. This triggered considerable controversy, which in turn led to a series of meetings between employees and managers that provided a forum for open discussion of corporate identity and culture, concerns regarding the restructuring of Siemens and pressing issues that are otherwise difficult to present to management (Wagner, 1999).
6. *Offer Seminars about Art*: Companies offer seminars about art (e.g. music, painting and theatre) as part of their human resource programmes. For instance, renowned German art theorist Max Imdahl held seminars on abstract, nonfigurative, and contemporary visual artworks for Siemens employees. Participants were encouraged to perceive visual material using multiple observational strategies such as spotting single parts, seeing the whole picture, having a brief or a close look, seeing between drawn lines and exploring optical illusions (Wagner, 1999).
7. *Employ Artists as Designers*: Companies employ artists for (re-)designing corporate image, buildings, products, events or even organisational processes. Best Markets hired the artist and architect group SITE to turn the buildings that hosted their markets into artworks. The redesigned Best showrooms succeeded as artworks ("reflected the uncertainty and precariousness of society and were definitely the early stirrings of Deconstructivism") and were instrumental in establishing a strong distinctive brand: "in the end SITE and Best had branded the idea so distinctly that it couldn't be transferred to another retailer when the company went bankrupt" (McCown, 2003, p. 1).
8. *Employ Artists as Consultants*: Companies employ artists as management consultants to use their artistic capabilities for organising material, solving problems and creating expression beyond language in coping with team or organisational problems. In addition, artists are hired as project advisers to support discussions and problem solving with their artistic capabilities. For instance, German artist Mathis Neidhart works as an artistic project advisor and as part of product development teams in which he contributes an "artistic perspective" on problem solving, and visually documents and expresses other team members' ideas (Neidhart, 2003).

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9. *Invite Artists-in-Residence*: Companies invite artists-in-residence to pursue art projects within the company, hoping that the process of artistic creation or the resulting artworks (be it their content, material or production method) will provide inspiration for the corporation. Xerox PARC (Palo Alto Research Center), for example, conducted an artist-in-residence programme called PAIR (PARC Artist-in-Residence) in which artists and scientists working on similar ideas (e.g. user interface design) or with similar methods (e.g. specific materials or software) were paired to inspire each other's work (Harris, 1999).
10. *Offer Artistic Workshops*: Companies offer artistic workshops to develop their employees' artistic abilities. In these workshops, employees or managers work to create artworks, learn about artistic processes and engage in expressing themselves through artistic media. For instance, Boston Consulting Group used acting courses in which consultants were trained to appear on stage and interact with the audience (including talking, gestures, mime and reading the audience's reactions; Buswick, 2005). Art therapeutic methods are used in some artistic workshops to draw out and address unconscious problems (Westwood, 2007).
11. *Use Art Practices as Metaphors*: Art practices can be used as models or metaphors that potentially inform organisational practices, as seen in the training method of Bang & Olufsen's international sales staff, who utilised intimate knowledge about theatre production – specifically the relationship and interaction between director, actor and audience – to shift sales talks from rational conversations focussed on technical data and price to customer interaction. This process enabled a pleasant aesthetic experience for both customers and sales persons during retail interactions (Darsø, 2004).
12. *Suggest Art Practices as Metaphors*: There is a significant body of literature that does not analyse empirical cases of arts-based interventions. Instead, art practices are suggested as potentially useful models and metaphors for organisational processes, developments or problems. For instance, authors reinterpret managers as artists (Dégot, 1987) or show what managers and organisations could learn from art ensembles, such as jazz bands or theatre companies (e.g. Weick, 1998). Authors refer to art history or specific art works as inspirational sources for general or case-specific organisational analyses (e.g. Watkins and King, 2002).

### **The underlying principles of arts-based interventions**

After reading the overview of how arts-based interventions have been conducted in the past, managers, consultants and scholars may find it helpful to understand the underlying principles of arts-based interventions. As the list of 12 kinds of arts-based interventions presented above treats each kind as a unique phenomenon in its own right, without revealing underlying rules, this approach will now be complemented by identifying patterns, commonalities and differences among the various kinds of arts-based interventions. The second analysis of the cases proposes the following three principles that structure the kinds of arts-based interventions and link them to underlying mechanisms. Arts-based interventions create organisational influence through the import of three types of artistic elements: *artworks*, *artistic capabilities*, and *art and art practices as metaphors*:

1. *Artworks in Organisational Contexts*: Organisational actors, most importantly managers, can exert influence by exposing stakeholders (primarily employees or customers) to artworks. Some arts-based interventions include invitations to art events (see kinds 1: *Provide Tickets for Art Events*, 2: *Organise Art Events* and 3: *Sponsor Art Events*), and adding purchased or commissioned artworks, typically by displaying artworks in the work environment (see kinds 4: *Buy and Collect Artworks* and 5: *Commission Artworks*). Arts-based interventions bring artworks into organisational contexts to create aesthetic communication, generating an experience that ranges from fairly casual entertainment (e.g. decorative art and mainstream music) to deeply touching encounters with personal perspectives, ideals, and ways of thinking. Therefore, engaging with artworks in organisations may lead to important individual and team development processes. In addition, organisations engaged in such arts-based interventions send a twofold message: first, they signal support for the arts (see kinds 1-6), which, through varying degrees of publicity, often counts as a sign of good corporate citizenship; and second, their choice of artwork conveys the organisations' values (e.g. conservative vs. progressive) and their assumed or desired position in society (e.g. elitist versus popular).
2. *Artistic Capabilities in Organisational Contexts*: Successful artists are commonly credited with possessing exceptional capabilities that enable the creation of artworks, but their capabilities are not always restricted to purely artistic use. Examples include unconventional thinking and acting ("originality"), reaching people through communication "beyond language" (i.e. by means of images, objects and sounds arranged in space and time or by texts that speak "between the lines"), making appearances with high (stage) presence and charisma, and pursuing goals with exceptional determination and resilience. Such capabilities are often useful in organisations if used carefully with respect to the right time, place and application. Arts-based interventions rely on two mechanisms to bring these capabilities into organisations. First, artists participate temporarily in organisational activities that may (see kinds 7: *Employ Artists as Designers* and 8: *Employ Artists as Consultants*) or may not (see kind 9: *Invite Artists-in-Residence*) include the production of artworks. Second, artists or educators train organisational members to develop further their artistic capabilities (see kind 10: *Offer Artistic Workshops* and, to a lesser extent, kind 6: *Offer Seminars about Art*), a technique which assumes that everybody possesses some (dormant) artistic qualities which can be drawn out and expanded upon.
3. *Art and Art Practices as Organisational Metaphors*: Drawing on the arts as an autonomous institutional field, arts-based interventions can use knowledge about the arts to inform organisational practices. This refers to all 12 kinds of arts-based interventions discussed above, as art?> practices may inform employees about new processes through any encounter with the arts. In particular, the analytical 11th and 12th kinds (*Use Art Practices as Metaphors* and *Suggest Art Practices as Metaphors*) point precisely to this idea. For instance, treating organisational practices as if they were art practices – as Bang & Olufsen did (Darsø, 2004) – can provide a basis for applying additional knowhow about (customer) communication, which can serve as a defamiliarisation technique (Schein, 2001) that enables a "fresh look", a new perspective on what is done within the organisation, which in turn facilitates organisational change and flexibility.

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#### *Be aware of [ . . . ]*

Arts-based interventions take various forms in terms of how they are realised and how they influence organisations and their actors. There is great potential in bringing the arts into organisations, but before engaging with the arts, it is essential to be aware of the necessary critical and reflective process that is fundamental to every kind of arts-based intervention. Arts-based interventions are tools with a lasting impact that may lead to major changes and innovations. Therefore, the first step of planning an arts-based intervention is to define the problem that should be addressed within the organisation: does the intervention aim at human resource development, organisational development or external communication? Second, how can the chosen goal be achieved? Is it through holistic learning and acquiring new perspectives? Or is it by learning specific processes and contents? Is it through shock effect and provocation to make people speak up within the organisation? Or is it about the organisation's or a team's identity? Only when these two fundamental aspects are clear, will it be possible to set up a successful arts-based intervention that draws on artworks, capabilities, art practices or a combination of these features.

#### **Conclusion**

Artistic *products* and *skills*, as well as *knowledge about* the arts, are meaningful and legitimate in the art world, yet uncommon, if not alien, in the organisational realm. Arts-based interventions use artworks, artistic capabilities and metaphorically applied knowledge about the arts to infuse art-specific difference into the organisational realm. The process through which organisations cope with this difference provides the basis for creating organisational influence on various aggregational levels of the organisation. If, for example, we consider a provocative painting hung where many employees or customers are able to see it, Geiger's painting in Siemens' main canteen demonstrates that organisational influence does not necessarily emanate from the painting itself, but rather from the initial reactions to the painting, further organisational responses to these reactions, and so forth. Therefore, arts-based interventions can be considered as successful as long as they are thoroughly planned, guided and reflected upon by all participating parties (i.e. managers, artists and employees). To enable this process, it may also be useful to consider an intermediary to guide the arts-based intervention – someone who is able to translate between the different languages of management, art and employees (as in the case of EA-Generali who hired artist Andrea Fraser as an intermediary between the then newly established art collection and the employees). In short, arts-based interventions consist of the release of an initial stimulus and the process of its dissemination throughout an organisation, which is subject to various ways and degrees of facilitation, guidance or governance.

#### **Keywords:**

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Management tool

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