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I The Start

Big words: art and innovation. How can we connect them? Trying to define them is going to get us in trouble. So let's broadly assume: this is about all kinds of art-forms and what they can contribute to all kinds of innovation in companies and other organisations.

The setting: May 2015 in the Hague, the Netherlands. Some 30 people assemble to follow the track Art for Innovation at the Pin-C-conference. Where Pin-C stands for participatory innovation Conference. Other tracks concentrated on the role of design for different innovation domains.

So here we are: artists, researchers, consultants (some have an artist background, some not), intermediaries between art and organisations. There is no fixed program for the 2 days ahead, except that there are some papers by researchers that will be discussed.

Everything you read are my thoughts and notions, not necessarily of others who were present…

II Understanding the context

The session starts with the use of theatre forum within a company. How to get support for innovation within a company. The group is divided in departments of the company. It is almost alarming to see how fast participants identify with the partial interest of 'their' department and how fast communication between departments disintegrates into dysfunctional and adversal communication.

Forum theatre is able to show the 'shadow systems' within an organisation: values, norms and power structures behind the facade of the official charts of a company. This recognition may be the first necessary step for change. It is awareness building, not the change itself.

The use of the artists making-process within a MBA (Master Business Administration) is another approach. By using artefacts and building together a different process of interaction develops than when just using words and concepts. It is easier to question each others presumptions and beliefs and to get deeper into the matter.

The use of rituals, silence, other ways of communicating than through words, all hint at making space for reflection on what was normal until that moment.

My first conclusion: many artist ways make it possible to ‘reframe’ the situation:

They shift the meaning of the situation
They deconstruct or attack the prevailing meaning
They make shadows visible: the rules that no one talks about
They make interaction possible between the shadow world and the official structure.
III The art of intervening

The question rises if it is only about reframing, or/and is also about bringing change itself. Does the art stays outside and reflect or comes inside and act?

An observation of mine: many artists use forms and rituals over and over, maybe adapted to the situation at hand. They have a domain or form which is theirs and which they always use.

There are also artists that start from scratch, they listen and watch first and then develop an idea on what to do. They are multiversal, every project is different, they hardly ever repeat themselves.

Both approaches are equally viable, depending on the situation. But in my observation it is more of a difference between artists then a conscious answer to the need and situation of a company.

Can we put artists interventions in a frame, with two dimensions? The first dimension: to start, knowing what you are going to do or to start, without knowing what you are ging to do (or: having a form at hand or jumping into the deep and improvising).

The second dimension: is this a repeatable process/form or it ist a first time/novel way

so specific it cannot be repeated.

Then you get this frame:

	repeatable	First time
knowing		
not-knowing		

It is possible to put a lot of artistic interventions within this frame. And of course it can be reframed.

My second conclusion: we do not know many frames that make sensible distinctions between sorts of artistic interventions.

IV Who does it?

At the conference track we were with researchers, researchers-artists, teachers, artists, consultants without artistic background, consultants with artistic background, intermediaries between artists and companies.

They all work on artistic interventions:

They can bring art into a company
They can bring artists into a company
They can bring artful ways into a company (sometimes even without an artist).
This makes the landscape of art for innovation quite complex. There are many possible actors and there are many possible acts. That is why there are no easy definitions of artistic interventions or of art for innovation.

My third conclusion: it is a constant changing scene where you have to look carefully to see who is on stage and what their act is.

V Art for Innovation

There are many areas in a company where art can help to innovate: products, services, processes, business models. Do we know which artistic interventions work best in what area? Or is that a stupid question? Because it is always up to people to change: change their consciousness, change their behavior, develop their talents?

A company has a need. It can decide to use an art approach to clarify that need, to develop that need into a better plan, to get backing for that plan, …

Art creates space, it can give a voice to people not being heard, to empower them. It can help unlock new energy, deconstruct extisting meaning and practice, develop new meaning and alternatives.

And therefore influence the existing situation. Is that innovation? Ninetynine percent of innovation is incremental anyway. And breakthrough innovations are always the result of a long process of other innovations.

My fifth conclusion: yes, art can work for innovation. Even if working on innovation might mean that innovation often happens alongside the process. But that is also the way innovation works in art.

VI Final act

I know a play should have three acts, but we can break that frame, right?

At the conference there were two people from a big company. In the end they were convinced that the company could use art for innovation. They experienced how it could work. But they did not know how to convince their superiors that art could work for innovation.

Art is much more form and process than a predictable outcome. That is its strength, but for selling it also its weakness.

The company people need a catalogue of examples, stories of other companies where it works. And CEO’s with a long term view and commitment. The ones that have some form of affiliation with the arts. The ones that only look at the next quarters’ results will not use art for innovation.

My sixth conclusion: we are looking for managers and CEO’s who like art, but do not know all its possibilities, yet. Who look further down the road then just the metrics. Who are able to put trust in people and processes before knowing the outcome.

There is work to do….

P.S. Just to be clear: where I write company you can also read (not-for-profit) organisation