



art as power update #26

performing vividly

# introduction

Writing about organisations as works of art is also a way to develop your thoughts about it. The act of writing forces you to think about what you want to tell and at the same time by doing it, putting your pen to paper or pianoing your key boards, the actual formulating happens, also in ways and with outcomes that might surprise you.

That is the wonder of the creative act. The pondering and the doing.

In this update I will continue the work I started in the previous update (#25) which talked about the unique occurrence of an organisation and colouring its context. I will elaborate on the acting, the doing which happens in an organisation. The acting delivers the result, but it also a process in which the unexpected, the wondrous happens.

That acting happens in an actively defined context to make it relevant and at the same time the acting shapes the context. In this update I will also look at this relationship.

Finally, I will share some thoughts about why I believe it is worthwhile working on becoming something of a work of art as an organisation.

Writing these two updates that deal with this idea of organisations as works of art, made me realise that the subject is everything but finished. The conversations, the actual experimenting, the thinking, the expressions and materialisations have just started. I hope you join me and others in the next steps.



# becoming a work of art

While the unique colouring of the organisation's context deals with words, ideas, opinions, aspirations, the reality of an organisation's occurrence is in the acting of its people.

It is the acting that results in the impressions of an organisation on its environment and in the minds of its audiences, directly through its services and more indirectly through the products it fabricates. The acting towards its Umfeld together with the vibes of its internal interaction define the being of an organisation. You might call it the performance of an organisation, in all the various meanings of the word performance.

That performance incorporates the individual and the collective exceptionality of an

organisation. The people acting in their work constitute the possibility of being a work of art.

This statement of the importance and the meaning of the acting does not answer the question what makes that performance happen and thus how the organisation becomes what you could consider a work of art.

Let me try to provide some ideas and suggestions for the answer to this important question.

An organisation becomes a work of art when the organisation itself believes that it is one and knows that one acts like one. That is an essential starting point to remember.

A process of activation towards the intended performance brings an organisation to that point. It is good to remember that the performance relates both to the outcomes of that materialised expression as it is perceived by the outside world and to the internal acting towards building and being an organisation.

The activation relates to the people who in their performance become a work of art. As individuals and collectively. It is as impactful as powerful an idea. It implies lengthy conversations, soul searching, finding a common ground, stimulating an open and critical artistic mind, a deep feeling of freedom. The activation is about finding a believe in each other's creative and expressive abilities and the shared conviction of being of relevance for a certain audience.

The concept of organisations as works of art asks for finding and defining for everybody an individual and common position towards what the work of art of which they are part of means.

The process of activating is learning by doing. Working on the performance is making it part of yourself and the organisation. And while working on the performance it is being defined.

The activation will gradually transforms into the eventual performance. A result which by definition will continue to evolve.

Such a process will impact the functions in an organisations. Some will remain untouched, others will be intensively reviewed, rethought and redefined. They become critical for the organisation being a work of art and will probably look like something that seemed improbable before.



# performance framed in a context

Having discussed the performance and in the previous update (#25) the context, I will now focus on the relationship between these elements.

The acting, the performance does not happen in a vacuum. It only becomes meaningful in a defined context, in an internal and external environment. The defining of the context to make it significant implies a possibility of an activity to take place. For argument's sake let's forget immaculate nature that succeeds in escaping the Anthropocene.

So when you talk about organisations as works of art both the performance and the context matter, not separately, but in their position towards each other.

That relationship exists also in our not artful undertakings. Hygienic condition in a stress free setting is evident for a doctor treating patients. When selling luxury goods an exuberant setting provides the backdrop and the pretext for indulgence and spending.

What does that synergy look like in an organisation that is a work of art? The answer is always very specific for each organisation, but using some generic terms, words like contrast, expressive energetic, surprising, tension, ambiguous, thoughtful come into mind.

The organisation being a work of art is set to stage its behaviour in a particular way, such that it makes an indent. An indent based upon a kind of critical and creative thinking and doing. An indent that exhibits a certain position

towards the human condition. An indent which does not have to involve everybody and everything. It is about turning one of the two knobs: an ordinary performance in a non ordinary defined context or an ordinary context for a non ordinary performance. Or both a extraordinary context and performance. But the idea of a 'Gesamtkunstwerk' is not a requisite. It may even be a little too much. It are often just only a few specific elements that proof to be determining.

Finding and materialising the performance and framing it in a context in such a way that it carries the attributes of a work of art is to a large extent also unexplored territory. But there are some ways forward that could help in this endeavour.

#### *different references*

One angle to help find unique attributes to an organisation is to look at how organisations which at first sight may be of little relevance, organise themselves: the role of the curator who sets a new context for art works, the way a collection of opinionated journalists determine the idiosyncrasy of a newspaper, the staging of a Shakespeare play in a modern theater.

#### *decisive, every decision*

Every day countless decisions are being taken in an organisation. Decisions to act, not to act, to change the setting, to keep the setting as it is, when to meet, when to call, what to emphasise, what to leave. Many of these decisions are just taken more or less automatically.



You could start taking these decisions with the organisation as a work of art in mind. Make every decision and the reflections about it count.

#### *études*

Engage in exercises which evoke reflections and sharpen abilities. It is through what I call *études* that you make steps towards mastering the capabilities and gain the confidence to shape an organisation as a work of art. At Stordes we develop and curate a collection of such *études*.

#### *experiment*

Any organisation is also a going concern to service customers and the public and to engage with the people employed. The extend to which you can disrupt this is not endless.

There is also a collective responsibility. Experiments can be a good way to try more radical changes and discover what is possible. The positive side of such a measure can be experienced, while a possible failure does not lead to unrecoverable damage. Experimenting is a *sine qua non* in arts.

A final word on the challenge of becoming a work of art. The balanced turning of the context and the performance knobs to create an artful synergy is not a static excise. The world around us and what is considered artful changes. The *avant garde* becomes the convention. Our thinking evolves.

Moving is the only constant for organisations as works of art.



# worthwhile

The subject of why it is worthwhile to pursue something of an work of art as an organisation is important and remains to be dealt with. I will give you some reasons to start building one.

First we have to recognise that organisations exist because they have a meaning in the umfeld they operate in. Without meaning or impact the reasons for its existence become irrelevant.

When an organisation resembles something of a work art its reasons for being reach new dimensions, The reference for accomplishment become varied and maybe even fluid, like the reasons why there is art. A question you can not nearly begin to answer and yet herein lies its magic and power.

When an organisation becomes what you could call a work of art economic parameters will not cease to matter. The proceeds of the organisation will remain super relevant. Its societal and environmental impact will continue to be on the agenda.

But there is more to it. We enter into the realm of the whole human being. The organisation that refers to a work of art surpasses the homo economicus modernicus.

Let's make it simple: care and dare come into play. Not as flat words but in their full weight of aspiration, love, hope, doubt, envy, dispair. To make these elements part of the equation is a choice. But maybe it is a choice that leads to enchantment and durability, enjoyment and longevity.

The consequences of such a choice are that all the decisions individually and collectively made in an organisation will be different. More holistic, more critical, more radical, more interesting, more democratic. Trade-offs between cost and benefits based upon rationality, power, economics, hard data, structured processes, will be upended.

That is a good thing in itself because it is more human, more interesting than the top-down, data driven, powerplay processes, even in their most kind versions, although it is also more complex and unfamiliar

A coloured context and a vivid performance lead to a significance that stands strong in the

dynamics of the world around us, with its big amplitudes, its erratic frequencies and its innumerable dimensions.

The organisation's meaning becomes deeply engrained and intensely expressed through art induced practices of decision making and acting consequentially.

An organisation as a work of art stands out, specifically and significantly, knowing that it keeps an intrinsic value beyond the next life threatening crisis or fashionable whim.

To the benefit and happiness of the people involved.

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p1:  
ei arakawa, *get back / get out*, 2020  
performance

p3:  
gilbert & george, living sculpture, 1969 (15-11)  
stedelijk museum, amsterdam

p6:  
boltanski, *after*, 2017  
installation at the oude kerk in amsterdam

p10:  
alice neel, *jackie curtis and ritta redd*, 1970

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