

The experiment in Liseleje

Sometimes experiments have to blow up to succeed. This is a story about the meeting between twenty very headstrong individuals.

This article was originally printed in the newspaper Politiken on 12 December 2004.

By Martin Ferro-Thomsen (ferro@lld.dk)

Art is an eye-opener. We have known this for millennia, but sometimes we need to stray from the beaten path and learn it again. One day in November, twenty artists, experts and researchers arrive at a remote farmstead, far from the hustle and bustle of the city. Here, near the foggy coastal town of Liseleje with its decrepit autumnal forests, they are to put together a book about themselves in just three short days.

They have all dropped their brushes to pick up laptops and mobile phones instead, have left their studios and have moved into institutions, companies, interest groups and government agencies. Here, they help the various organisations produce on-site art that in some way include, comment on or transform the organisation's environment and work.

The research organisation Learning Lab Denmark and the artist Kent Hansen have set up the Liseleje meeting. This learning experiment is based on the comparatively simple idea that understanding is greatly improved if you meet the ones you try to understand face to face. Nothing else about this concept is simple, though, because how do you go about making twenty headstrong individuals work together as a team? And how to transform their highly disparate experiences and work routines into something as final as a book?

Explosions in open space

The first problems arise Thursday at noon, shortly after people have arrived at Lisegården where the experiment is to take place. We are seated in a circle, trying to define the common project. The discussion quickly turns heated, and the general conception of the artist as uncompromising and temperamental is quickly confirmed. Any attempt to control the conversation is instantly derailed, and chaos ensues.

The eldest participant is British artist Barbara Steveni, co-founder of the 'Artist Placement Group', which has worked with numerous organisations, from British Airways and ESSO to public institutions, in several countries, often under the slogan "the context is half the work of art".

Steveni must be in her sixties, but you wouldn't be able to tell it from watching her in action. Wearing an Adidas outfit and bursting with energy, she is overwhelmed by just being present. Her enthusiasm makes sense, when we hear her explain how her group has been disbarred from the 'in'-crowd in England – not just once, but twice! The first time by the political establishment that accused the group of 'terrorism', the second time it was the art scene that accused them of social engineering. But there are signs that they are about to get the credit they deserve: "All of this is some hot shit right now," as she puts it.

Talking oranges

In the afternoon, we engage in Open Space, a technique where the participants make their own agenda. This time around, constructive processes abound, and despite constant friction, the room explodes with ideas for the book.

The arrangers originally proposed the production of a so-called 'Thin book', which is a rapidly produced non-profit book written by many authors. This makes several participants think of a guidebook; usually with thin pages, to avoid the book taking up too much space. Others propose a graphic novel featuring two talking oranges. This idea comes up when we talk of having a 'fruitful discussion'. Others propose that we include several bands through the book; each with a different fruit, and from time to time the reader should hit a jackpot, a certain combination of different fruits, just as if it were a slot machine.

Someone else suggests the production of a 'non-chronological timeline' of developments in the arts and in organisations, which immediately give rise to reflection from the more pragmatic participants; what would such a thing look like? Aside from being an artist, aladin (who insists on the lowercase spelling) has been crowned the world's best magician several times. He, of course, proposes that the book should be a deck of cards, his preferred tool of the trade. This would enable readers to put together their very own book and would of course add a touch of magic to the whole thing.

Everybody has their own idea about what the book should look like, and the proposals fall like a torrential rainfall. The process is frustrating, but the thought of producing the ultimate publication drives the participants along full of energy. When we leave the meeting room-cum-war zone in the evening, we have heard so many ideas and arguments that it seems impossible to cram it all into just one book.

Reasonable disagreement

Luckily, doing the impossible is par for the course for the arts. One artist introduces the concept of 'a walk in the woods'. When English politicians disagree, they leave the meeting room and go for a 'walk in the woods' to find what they call a 'reasonable disagreement'. This strategy turns out to be very useful in our work the following day, when many take to the woods for a while, both metaphorically and literally.

Slowly we gather the ideas from yesterday into something more tangible. The conversation still swirls around the room like bats in a cave, but a direction is gradually emerging from the chaos, particularly concerning the contents of the book. Who should the target audience be? Blue-collar workers, academics, managers, ministers or artists?

Among the other issues are the questions about what collaboration models the various artists and organisations use for their work. We also work of a series of scenarios where the artists have to provide the answers. I present the most unlikely scenario I can come up with, in order to see if there is a limit to what artists can and will work with:

"We're in a war zone. The general is a real asshole, and he knows it. He wants to improve his image, to make him seem a visionary leader to his men and as a liberator to the locals in the village he has just occupied. Can you help?"

Later on, the English artist/curator Gavin Wade told me the question was a very good one. He would like to meet the general and to work with him, but was somewhat afraid of censorship. Apparently there are no limits to art – the harder, the better.

Groups form spontaneously about this or that project, among them a strange contraption comprised of triangles, one for each participant. Unfolded, the thing points in every direction, but it folds into just one triangle. It is basically the same process the participants try to duplicate: to become as one.

Democratic innovation

In my seven-man group, we discuss what it is that motivates artists to work with organisations – and

vice versa. I am semi-hidden behind my computer, where I frantically attempt to write everything down, to provide a balance to the somewhat rambling conversation. We decide that artists are, among other things, motivated by the desire to work with some very specific opportunities in a given organisation, such as technologies, infrastructure or a particular social make-up.

We hear the example of a French artist who dreamt of making a car breathe, and who therefore had to collaborate with a car manufacturer. Another example is the man behind the artist initiative 'democratic innovation', the artist Kent Hansen, who wondered why we so often let go of our democratic rights in a workplace, and who therefore established a combined development and art project involving two Danish factories. Another example is related to us, this one about an artist who smashed the windows in a branch of the Dresdner Bank and for a whole week let the gaping holes force everyone, the bank's staff, the customers in the bank and anyone else just passing by, to think about what value and safety actually means to us.

Patrick Mathieu is a middle man between artists and businesses, and believes that the companies' drift towards the creative arts is often a result of a desire to take a new look at, often rigid, rules and routines in order to obtain new insights about the organisation. His job consists of establishing a 'safe space' in an organisation, one where artists and employees can meet on equal terms to discuss specific issues in the organisation. "We by no means aim to disrupt the organisations," he says, and several artists around him nod their agreement.

He has often collaborated with French artist Philippe Mairese, who is also with us at Lisegården. He has invented a system to connect up to twelve people with each other, so that they can choose who they want to listen to, but not whom they can talk to. The concept is very simple, but the consequences are staggering, to which I can testify because I try the system myself later that day. It is a very disconcerting experience. I speak into the darkness, and frantically turn the knob in front of me, while fragments of conversations are projected onto a nearby wall as written text.

The session reminds me of the past two days, where each of us has groped around in the dark. But suddenly there is a connection – a breakthrough. There is a moment of closeness, and it is possible to actually reach the other participants.

Out of the woods

From this moment on, we suddenly work together as a team with a shared goal. The last day and a half we establish setting up a 'book factory', replete with production manager, service department and three production units. Who would have thought that the dullest of organisational metaphors would fit these creative individuals? But it works, and we can almost hear the pieces clicking into place.

The book will become three books in one: A five-minute version (based on the triangles mentioned above), a 50-minute version (the book itself with 96 small pages) and a five-hour version (on the accompanying CD-ROM), together representing three basic shapes; the triangle, the square and the circle. The triangle will also serve as the navigational tool for the book, so the user can quickly establish an overview of the contents and learn how to combine it in various ways. How's that for user-friendliness?

The contents of the book fall in four main sections: A general chapter on what motivates artists and organisations to collaborate, what collaboration models are available, and how to match artists and companies. Next is a chapter with examples and case studies, and lastly comes two chapters of a more theoretical nature, detailing how artists work with value, aesthetics and flow in organisations and around them.

There will also be an extensive chapter with disclaimers by the artists – this was a very early suggestion, and turns out to be an expedient way to get fundamentally disagreeing participants to collaborate on the common project. On the CD, there will be room for longer articles, images and videos, including one that walks the viewer through the 'book factory'.

On the trip home Sunday afternoon, the trees thin out until there is just a single one left – the Christmas tree on Rådhuspladsen, which is lit up just as we arrive. I'm struck by the fact that I have been a witness to a huge cultural clash: The focused and rational academics and businessmen versus the process-oriented and so-called irrational artists.

Of course things are not so simple, but the key factor in the successful meeting of the two cultures was certainly the interaction between the two: The journey into the open space where anything is possible – and the journey back to the feasible where you notice opportunities you never knew were there.

The art as eye-opener. It seems so obvious that one has to wonder why the art are so often confined to the 'white cubes, usually only aimed at connoisseurs, that go by the names of galleries and museums. Organisational artists go one step further and meet the audience and collaboration partners where they live and work, sweat, love and despair: on the factory floor, in the management office, in the shelter and the lab. In short – where people are.

INFO 1 Martin Ferro-Thomsen is the co-arranger of the Organisational Art Summit and affiliated to Learning Lab Denmark, where he is writing his Master's Thesis on Organisational Art. He is a co-editor of the forthcoming Thin Book; the title of which may or may not be A Walk in the Woods, Sex with Strangers or perhaps Barriers and Carriers.

Read more at www.ild.dk/XXXX

INFO 2 Organisational Art Summit

The participants came from England, Germany, Italy, Switzerland, The Netherlands and Denmark to meet in Liseleje on 25-28 November 2004. The list of participants reflect the fact that organisational artists work with people who are not artists themselves, hence the diversity of backgrounds:

- aladin - artist, CEO of 'alkhemi', strategist and magician (England)
- Barbara Steveni, artist, co-founder and manager of O+I - formerly APG (England)
- Barnaby Drabble, artist and curator (England/Switzerland)
- David Barry, professor, Learning Lab Denmark (Denmark/USA)
- Gavin Wade, artist and curator (England)
- Henrik Schrat, artist (Germany)
- Henrik Mayer, artist, Reinigungsgesellschaft (Germany)
- Hilde Bollen, consortium coordinator, Learning Lab Denmark (Denmark/Belgium)
- Karolin Timm-Wachter, consultant, Siemens Arts Program (Germany)
- Kent Hansen, artist, democratic innovation (Denmark)
- Lise Autogena, artist (England/Denmark)
- Lotte Darsø, research manager, Learning Lab Denmark (Denmark)
- Martin Ferro-Thomsen, Learning Lab Denmark (Denmark)
- Marjolein Schaap, critic and curator (The Netherlands)
- Nicola Setari, Ph.D. researcher, Scuola di Studi Avanzati di Venezia (Italy)
- Teike Asselbergs, artist, Orgacom (The Netherlands)
- Tine Byrckel, writer and critic, Information (Denmark/France)
- Patrick Mathieu, consultant (France)
- Philippe Mairesse, artist, Acces Local (France)
- Scott Rigby, artist and manager of Basekamp (USA)
- Susanne Kandrup, entrepreneur et al., Learning Lab Denmark (Denmark)