

Assemblages between performance and organizational studies: How to gain a new strategy for an art institution?

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Introduction

Within art institutions the rationale of economics has become more and more important: Quality management, process-oriented management, the development of strategies, visions, missions, etc. are used within art institutions as if there is a self-evident congruence between the logics of business firms and art organizations. But is there not a danger, if the economic paradigm is imposed on art institutions that something gets lost? From my point of view we have convincing theories within the area of performance studies that challenge, complete or criticize the economic paradigm. This paper would like to strengthen the idea, that theatre or performance theory – in connection with the discourse on sociomateriality – can avoid blind spots of the management studies by taking the transformative power of performance (Fischer-Lichte, 2004, S. 17) seriously.

The article starts with genuine citations of different founders of performance studies – an area, which is quite heterogeneous and polyvalent. Marvin Carlson writes in his critical introduction to the concept “performance”: “The term ‘performance’ has become extremely popular in recent years in a wide range of activities in the arts, in literature, and in the social sciences.” (Carlson, 2004, S. 1)

Different expressions are used (not always in a comprehensible way) – like performance, performative and performativity, which semantics depends on the specific discourse they were used in. In a second step I would like to show some insights in management studies in general, and the strategy management in particular. Afterwards I will try present some aspects of sociomateriality discourse taking place in organizational studies. As a basis for discussion I would like to formulate five theses based on my argumentation afterwards.

Finally, I would plead for “a performative epistemology” as Karen Barad formulated it in her article “Posthumanist performativity: towards an understanding of how matter comes to matter” (2003). It helps us to provide a basis to reflect the performativity of management studies in art schools and probably helps us to constructively subvert the management paradigm.

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Performance / performative / performativity

Dealing with performance / performative / performativity we can follow different discourses of linguistics, anthropology and (theatre) art.¹ Firstly, the philosophers John Austin and his scholar John R. Searle made us clear how we do things with words. Austin distinguished two types of utterances: the constative and the performative: “The former simply describes, whereas the latter indicates that the issuing of the utterances is the performing of an action.” (Austin, 1975, S. 6f.) – “To say something is to do something.” (Austin, 1975, S. 12) To give an example: When I tell you: “This paper is coming soon to an end.” I promise you something. – If a hundred more pages follow, you will probably think that I broke my promise I made. Austin distinguished between three different forms of speech act: the locutionary, the illocutionary and the perlocutionary. The locutionary was defined as a normal utterance, roughly equivalent with the meaning of the sentence. The illocutionary acts “call into being, order, and promise, but also inform, affirm, assert, remark, and so on.” (Carlson, 2004, S. 62) The “perlocutionary act focus on what it seeks to bring about in a hearer, convincing, persuading, deterring, even surprising or misleading.” (ibid.) The linguistic remarks of the two philosophers became widely accepted, especially within linguistics they had a great resonance. “One might say that these theories have provided a methodology for considering language as performance. (...) They have provided the grounding for the concept of performativity; a concept and term that has become almost as widely circulated, and perhaps even more contested, than that of performance itself.” (Carlson, 2004, S. 61)

Secondly, the expression “performance” is defined for instance as a genuine part of customs, practices, and rituals of cultures. (Klein & Sting, 2005) Klein & Sting summarize “performances (were) always an integral part of the everyday life and the everyday experiences” (ibid., S. 7, translated by the author). Citing Victor Turner it gets clear, that performances are practices, in which a culture defines itself:

“Cultures are most fully expressed in and made conscious of themselves in their ritual and theatrical performances (...). A performance is a dialectic ‘flow’, that is, spontaneous movement in which action and awareness are one, and ‘reflexivity’, in which the central meanings, values and goals of a culture are seen ‘in action’, as they shape and explain behaviour. A performance is declarative of our shared humanity, yet it utters the uniqueness of particular cultures. We will know one another better by entering one another’s performances and learning their grammars and vocabularies.” (Turner, zit. in Schechner & Appel, Introduction, 1991, S. 1)

¹ I am following in the next passages Klein & Sting (2005: 7-24) and also Marvin (2005). This is – of course – a non-exhaustive list of possible concepts. For further details see Marvin 2005.

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Klein and Sting continue their remarks with the insight that performances can arise out of rituals, they can be conscious or unconscious adoptions of roles or a protest, business, entertainment or avant-garde art. Performances are embedded within a norm and/or value system and ask for the passing on and transformation of cultural rules, norms and values in the practice. Klein's and Sting's view is that social transformations, which became a part of our everyday globalized world, strengthen the role of the performative in culture and society, i.e. any form of practice can reconstruct or deconstruct a particular culture. The performative is becoming more and more important in diverse systems like economy, politics, science and sports.

If we want to follow these ethnologists or cultural anthropologists every action can be defined as a performance.² Additionally, Marvin asserted that "much of the recent anthropological analysis of performance has laid special stress on how performance can work within a society precisely to undermine tradition, to provide a site for the exploration of fresh and alternative structures and patterns of behavior." (Carlson, 2004, S. 12f.)

Thirdly, within arts performances are not only events in a multi-media publicity, but there are also (theatric) art practices. To find the least common denominator Hans-This Lehmann, the writer of the text "posttraumatic theater" formulates the following definition. "A performance is then a performance when the performers announce their action as a performance." (Lehmann, 2001, S. 245, translated by the author). "In the theater as a locus of the 'production of presence', fugaciousness, contemporaneity and perishableness (...) are becoming a characteristic of theatric events and a symbol of the dynamics of the social." (Klein & Sting, 2005, S. 13, translated by the author) It is not only a specific theatre practice it is an "aesthetic practice" (ibid.). Since the 1990s the theatre arts become more and more an "art practices that is non-linear, disharmonic, not-representative and interpretative." And Klein & Sting go on: "The prioritization of the dialogue, of the collective work, and of the participatory engagement makes the performance to a dialogue medium to a democratic scenic art practice, which founds a critical instance towards the social circumstances." (ibid., S. 14, translated by the author)

I would like to end my – not at all – all-embracing remarks with the quote of Peggy Phelan.

Performance is an "ephemeral art form, which can be integrated because of its economic

² Another question would be how Judith Butler's concept of performativity shall be interpreted in this discourse. Her definition is "performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration." (Butler, 1999, S. 7) As she wrote herself the concept of ritual is allied with the notion of the habitus of Pierre Bourdieu. (ibid., 16) – another aspect that would be interesting for us to discuss.

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uselessness in the circle of reference, representation and reproduction.” (Phelan, 1993. S. 146ff. zit. in Klein & Sting, 2005, S. 15, translated by the author)

In summary, if we try to look for common characteristics of the term performances we can follow Klein and Sting: 1) Performances create societies within a certain moment. They intensify the face-to-face-communication and provoke a different relation between the actor and the audience. 2) It is the audience that legitimizes the performance and judges the success or the failure of the performances. But: “There is no criteria catalogue on which basis the success can be judged as a result of a successful interaction.” (2005, S. 10, translated by the author)

“Performance” has developed to an interesting research topic during the last decades. The performative turn is just one sign of this expansion. Richard Schechner, one of the founders of performance studies, says that performance studies have the advantage that they “start where most limited-domain disciplines end. (...) A performance studies scholar examines texts, architecture, visual arts, or any other item or artifact of culture not in themselves, but as players in ongoing relationships, that is, ‘as’ performers.” (Schechner, What is performance studies?, 2013, S. 3)

Management – what is it all about?

As I introduced in this paper, art institutions are becoming more and more part of an economic or managerial system. Art universities became like all other universities part of a competitive word, nationally and internationally. The economic rhetoric is probably all over the places very similar: lack of resources, commitment to excellence – no matter if useful or not – the institutional rank in an international ranking system: These are topics we probably all have to deal with. Of course, the economic imperialism has been strongly criticized – especially after the financial collapse. Nevertheless, the economic paradigm with its basis on the methodological individualism and the (bounded) rationality-principle – survived very fit.

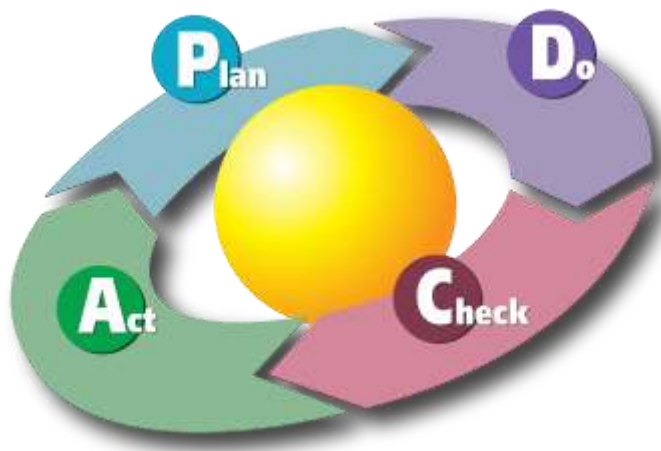
Management studies are a part of the economic system. And it is interesting to see that this discipline is very open. Eclectically, it brings together diverse concepts – psychological, philosophical, biological, artistic, (even) sociological – that help the management researchers to make the organizations more efficient and effective, which is the aim of all economic effort. Management studies try to bring a certain structure in the complex organisational world. Here is an example that helps to illustrate this circumstance exemplarily.

Within the last two or three decades the so-called “process” has become an important assumption within organizational life. Quality Management, human resources management, strategy management etc. are organized effectively and efficiently within this time-oriented course, in which

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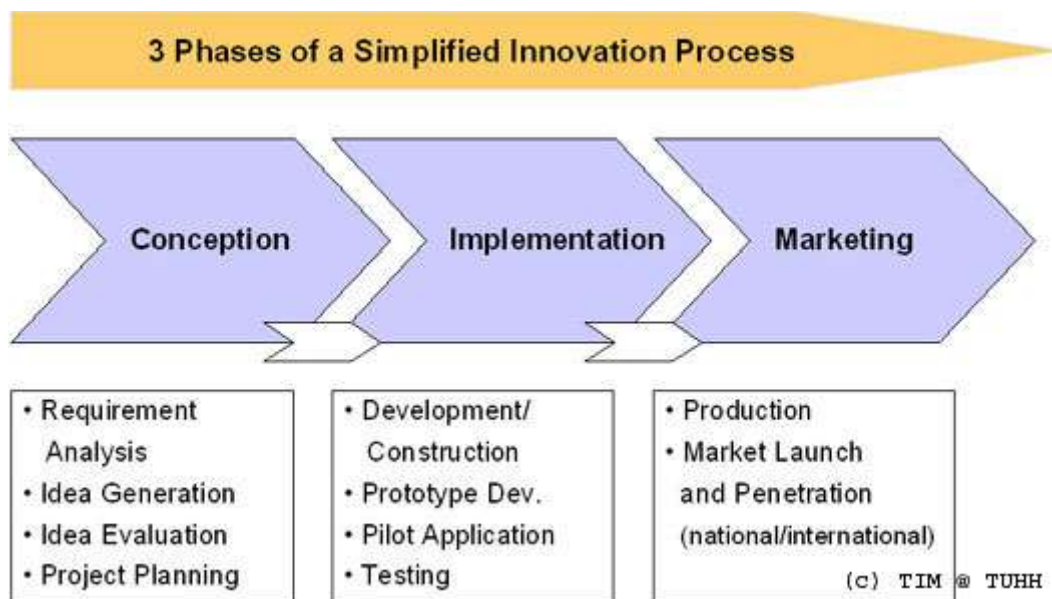
precisely defined tasks are done with a result-oriented act. At the beginning there is an event triggered by an actor. These actions transform primarily defined values into output values through the connected actions.

Astonishingly, this way of seeing the organizational world has become the basis for nearly every management act. Just to give you two examples: The first is the Plan – Do – Check – Act-Process. On the collaborative platform wikipedia we can read that this “PDCA (...) is an iterative four-step management method used in business for the control and continuous improvement of processes and products.” (Wikipedia, online)



(Wikipedia, online)

We can also define a process for innovation.



(Institute for Technology and Management, online)

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I personally like very much the arrows that imaginably include diverse aspects. There is a time scale, there is some kind of development, and there is a sort of causality which is not questioned.

Nevertheless, it would be also possible, that all these idealistic processes are filled with chaos and conflicts that could lead to a crisis. Normally, the described processes help the actors to believe in a manageable reality.³

Within management studies we still find some concepts that believe for instance in feasibility, in definite semantics, in communication as a simple sender-recipient-modell, etc. But what is important here, is, that these processes are performative in the sense that they lead the actors in their constructing a relative reality.

Organization studies

Within organizational studies theorists like Wanda Orlikowski, Paul Carlile, Paul M. Leonardi, David McKenzie, David Seidl, etc. started to become aware that performative practices in the organizational life are worth being studied. Additionally, they began to focus on the materials like computer technologies, architecture, process descriptions, etc. and asked in what way they perform the organizational culture. Researchers like Orlikowski (2007) Suchman (Suchmann, 2007) or Carlile (2002 & 2004) started to take into account material objects and to explore “the connection between the material and the social” (Woolgar, 2002, S. 265) to find out how much “autonomy and agency can be granted to material objects” (Pels, Hetherington, & Vandenberghe, 2002, S. 8). Materiality should therefore no longer be ignored by organization theory. The field should consider the practices, i.e. the “ways in which organizing is bound up with the material forms and spaces through which humans act and interact.” (Orlikowski, 2007, S. 1435) The material object has become autonomous and generates an epistemic culture (Knorr-Cetina, zit. in Suchmann, 2007, S. 262). The authors dealing with sociomateriality found their concepts mostly on the actor-network-theory (ANT) founded by Bruno Latour, Michael Callon, Madeleine Akrich, etc. ANT treats human AND non-human actors (things, objects, etc.) as a part of a social network where they co-construct their reality (Latour, 2007, S. 94). This implies that actors construct relative realities. An actor is „the moving target of an enormous amount of entities that swarm to him“ (ibid. 81, our translation). Entities are assemblages, in other words: a “list of all [...] associations into which one element enters.” (Latour, 1999, S. 161)

³ Of course there is a strong movement of systemic approaches that started in the 1970s. These approaches are absolutely aware of the non-manageability in linear, well-ordered processes (as representatives I would like to mention here Niklas Luhmann or Dirk Baecker).

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Different researchers directed their attention to the “mutual constitution of humans and artefacts, and the enacted nature of the boundaries between them” (Suchmann, 2007, S. 260) These studies have in common the symmetry between humans and non-humans. They are all trying to comprehend how reality is an assemblage constituted by an interplay of activities in which human and non-human agents constitute practices. Sociomaterial scholars argue that if researchers focus “these sociomaterial aspects of everyday practices” they “will open up important avenues for examining and understanding the on-going production of organizational life.” (Orlikowski, 2007, S. 1445)

They are aware that the “performative of the sociomaterial assemblage is (...) fleeting, fragile, and fragmented, entailing uncertainty and risk, and producing intended and unintended outcomes.” (Orlikowski, 2007, S. 1445) Orlikowski's definition reminds us very much of the definition we know of performative theories.

Focus on a practical example: How to develop a strategy for an art institute?

Within the reality of accreditation, i.e. economization, a lot of art universities defined new strategies as profit organizations regularly do. Observing the practice, one recognizes that developing a strategy for an organisation implies the development of a plan, a sort of “consciously intended course of action, a guideline (or set of guidelines) to deal with a situation.” (IfM Management Technology Politics, online). The actors would like to achieve goals and reach them purposefully. Of course, these plans deal with the competitors and define what is to do to be more successful than the others. Furthermore, they reflect in what environment the firm is located. The realization of the strategy follows normally a certain pattern. Or in other words: “a definition that encompasses the resulting behaviour: Strategy is a pattern – specifically, a pattern in a stream of actions.” (ibid.). – Also here, we recognize that the processlike thinking is part of this management reality. – Finally, the strategy is a perspective, it is an “ingrained way of perceiving the world.” (ibid.) If all members of a firm share this perspective, it is more probable, that the strategy is going to be realized successfully.

The way of thinking is very much based on the classic work of Henry Mintzberg (1978 & 1994). Management studies certainly developed this concept further (Golsorkhi et al., 2010). Strategies are read within the academic discourse as practices. And a lot of researchers have, as David Seidl writes “called recently for an exploration of strategy as a form of social practice”. (Seidl, 2003, S. 175) But nevertheless, the every-day-knowledge is very much based on these 5Ps or at least on parts of them.⁴

⁴ Another question that arises here is, how management studies influence the practice and vice versa. It is obvious that management studies are a practice-based research that influences the practice fundamentally.

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Five Theses

In the following I would like to formulate five theses that are based on the previous chapters.

1) Business tools, like the development of strategy processes – became a part of our culture and are certainly embedded within a norm system that focuses efficiency and effectivity of every (economic) action we do. The performance of developing a strategy is a sort of reconstruction of our belief in efficiency, effectivity and even feasibility. One could even say that these strategy development become part of our organizational or even everyday culture. Management scientists see these tools as instruments for organizing the complicated or even complex world. And it seems that they have become part of our culture without being questioned. But these are not performances that undermine traditions, on the contrary, they stabilise the (managerial) system.

2) Processes like the introduced PDCA-process – that are implicitly also a part of the strategy process – take over a role as an artefact that establishes relationships to other actors, human and non-human, and even takes over the function of ordering the actions of all other participants.

Assemblages, i.e. networks emerge that evolve a relative reality without thinking if there are other possible realistic (for example strategy) concepts.

3) These managerial instruments perform a reality that is not fully compatible with an *expertocracy* existing at an art institute. “The grammars and vocabularies” of the management based rituals are experienced nearly as a foreign culture. Despite of the lived participation within (art/education) institutions, the (management/strategy) processes were experienced as top-down-processes that are initialised by the leaders. Surely, the management level needs to react to the constraints that are given by politics (for exemple to go through an accreditation process) in order to legitimize the usage of the public money. Of course these performances re-establish a society and some of the lived culture – be it positive or not – and also trigger new realities, and develop new cultures. But within art institutions the invitation to set up for instance a new strategy is experienced by the members of staff rather as a restriction albeit strategy performances could trigger new challenging realities.

4) Management studies are precarious; they are looking for efficiency and effectivity. For instance, in big industrial firms the will to be the most efficient and effective player lead to the continuous improvement management. Every firm member proved if there could be simplification or a reduction of their area of operation. The not-intended side-effect was that these firms build up a culture in which a radical innovation was no longer possible. (Kaudela-Baum, Holzer, & Kocher) Everybody was thinking in very narrow “safety fence”; thinking out of the box was no longer questioned. A radical innovation was not achievable any more. If we want to set up a new strategy for an art institution it

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is necessary to develop a consciousness for the performativity of management tools and we have to reflect how they guide our (future) actions in a very economic sense (MacKenzie, Muniesa, & Siu, 2007).

5) Performance prioritize the dialogue, the collective work, and the participatory engagement. It is, as we have heard, a “dialogue medium to a democratic scenic art practice, which founds a critical instance towards the social circumstances.” (Klein & Sting, S. 14, translated by the author). But I would like to take into account Bruno Latours concept. A dialogue is very fuzzy and fluid, albeit it is possible to set up a critical instance towards society with performances. Nevertheless also the material shall take over a critical role. A sustainable consolidation is only possible when actors – human and non-human – build assemblages, networks that perform a new relative reality.

Conclusions & a plea for the assemblages between performance and organizational studies

I would like to plead for the crisis. In arts the crisis can be a result of a performance; within economics is often a precondition in order to get into collaborative work. A fundamental problem is that the rational benefit-cost-analysis, the methodological individualism are still part of the paradigm of economics and/or management studies. An economic actor acts individually, is rational in the sense that he is part of a benefit-cost-analysis. Only in a fundamental crisis, in which his individual plans are no longer helpful, because he doesn't know what the future will bring, he can't make a plan in which he anticipates what will be. Only then – from an economic point of view – he starts to start perform and transform collectively.

What is intriguing about the sociomateriality and performance studies is that the subversion of the existing system, and also the collaborative work leads to new ideas that could reset/challenge the economic paradigm that has become an important part of our culture.

Probably new assemblages between organizational and performative studies set up new assemblages we have never thought about when we start to become performers dealing with the different networks and used artefacts. Probably through duplication of the different forces of the performance and organizational studies will create resistances or parodies and dekontextualization of the economic paradigm. The collaboration between human and non-humans brings new perspectives, new rooms for manoeuver. We need to discover a “performative epistemology” that “takes account of the fact that knowing does not come from standing at a distance and representing, but rather from a direct material engagement with the world” (Barad, 2003, S. 49)

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