Boosting creativity in organizations?
The role of intermediaries as translators in artistic interventions in organizations

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Abstract

Following management's growing interest in creative skills, new projects involving artists and organizations through specialized intermediaries have emerged. Researchers call them arts-based methods, or artistic interventions in organizations. Their aim is to bring artists into contact with members of an organization, as the former are supposedly capable of enhancing creativity of the latter. This approach has been challenged by research, on the grounds that artistic creativity and managerial creativity are very different, preventing a fruitful transfer between both worlds.

In this article, we propose to use translation theory based on Callon's model to analyze all entities involved in such projects, and to understand whether it is possible for organizations to enhance the creativity of their members through arts-based methods.

Based on 16 interviews with top managers, artists, participants or intermediaries of such projects, we show that what happens is not exactly a transfer of creativity. Instead, arts-based methods help to recreate a favorable context for the creativity that already exists within the organization. Arts-based methods allow to legitimate forms of creativity previously hidden by participants. This activation leads to the emergence of innovative solutions that the organization can then implement.

Keywords: arts-based methods, artistic interventions in organizations, creativity, innovation, art

Introduction

In recent years, companies have increasingly called on artists to work within them (Sköldberg, Woodilla, & Berthoin Antal, 2016)

For these artistic interventions in organizations (AIO) to bring the expected results, artists and managers must come to understand each other around the necessity or usefulness of the artistic presence in companies. However, their context, their mode of reasoning, their values, their objectives, etc. are at best different, at worst opposed (Berthoin Antal, 2012; Debenedetti, Perret, & Schmidt, 2019).

For managers, when pure patronage is not in question, this relationship corresponds to an objective of transformation of the organization or its employees (taking inspiration from – or being guided by – artists to develop creativity of their teams) or to facilitate learning and change (Debenedetti & Perret, 2019). For this transfer to take place, a dialogue must be able to take place either directly or indirectly, via intermediaries. However, this mutual understanding of each person's issues is not easy and requires some precautions before the intervention, during the intervention and after the intervention (Debenedetti & Perret, 2019). This necessity leads us to ask two main, complementary questions that will guide our literature review:

I) under what conditions is it useful and possible to import creativity from the arts into management?

II) to what extent is it useful or necessary for third party actors to intervene to make this transfer possible or facilitate it?

Literature review: artistic skills at the service of organizational creativity

A dense literature in management sciences has emerged around the concept of creativity. Today, researchers agree to define it as the ability to have an idea or to carry out a production that is both new and adapted to its context (Amabile, 1996; Bonnardel, 2009; Lubart, Zenasni, & Barbot, 2013)

Conditions for individual creativity

Research on creativity and its evolution along the life of individuals tends to show that it is usually high at the child age, but it disappears progressively when they grow up. For many researchers, one of the main reasons for this could be the way education systems and methods

are designed (Noddings, 2013; Page & Thorsteinsson, 2017). One of the most cited academics on this subject was Sir Kenneth Robinson and for him, there were several reasons for this loss, one being the way education learn how to avoid mistakes (Robinson, 2008, 2015). This leads to take no risk and discourages creativity (Sokol *et al.*, 2015).

After school this fear of making mistakes continues, as most management systems are failure adverse (Bertinetto, 2016; Dubina, 2005; Farson & Keyes, 2002). Beyond killing creativity (Amabile, 1998), this contributes also to make employees feel they are not legitimate when it comes to being creative, as this fosters a cumulative process of diminishing self-esteem (Pretz & Nelson, 2017) which leads to a loss of creativity (Wang & Wang, 2016; Williams, 2002).

Awan and Zamir (2016) show that employee empowerment, self-esteem and the reward system have an influence on their commitment to the creative process via the ability to motivate themselves and feel competent. This, in turn, contributes to improving employee creativity in the workplace.

As a complementary process, Williams (2002) has studied how "Creative processes halt when those who generate creative ideas self-censor them". Focusing on this selfcensorship enables him to suggest management systems where employees are invited to be more self-confident in their capacity to propose new ideas.

A context fostering creativity.

Beyond its definition, the literature then became interested in the structures housing creativity and the interactions between creative individuals, making it possible to shed new light on its organizational dimension.

The objective becomes to explain creativity not only by the characteristics of the creative individual, but also by the material context and social in which it evolves (Amabile, 1983, 1996; Amabile, Goldfarb, Brackfleld, 1990; Woodman, Schoenfeldt, 1989, 1990; Woodman, Sawyer, Griffin, 1993).

The socio-psychological approach which results from this perspective essentially aims to bring out cause and effect links; processual approaches (Amabile, 1988; Torrance, 1988; Ford, 1996) partially shift the attention of researchers, gradually abandoning the establishment of causal links between contributing factors and creative outcomes in favor of a better understanding of the creative act itself (creative process).

The socio-cognitive approach proposed by Drazin, Glynn and Kazanjian (1999) will deepen this decentering of the object of study, but also renew its perspective. By combining the notions

of engagement process and cognitive process, their approach makes it possible to articulate together dimensions of creativity that the numerous works which preceded them treated more or less distinctly: their definition of creativity thus integrates the notion of interactionism (Woodman, Schoenfeldt, 1989, 1990) and the multiplicity of scales contributing to creativity at the organizational scale (Woodman, Sawyer, Griffin, 1993), while broadening the processual approaches of Amabile (1988) and Torrance (1988) focused on the individual, and that of Ford (1996) more focused on the cause-and-effect links between the psychosocial context and its creative outcome.

The question is on the one hand to teach everyone to rediscover and mobilize their own creativity, and on the other hand to develop the organizational creativity of a team. To answer this issue, we propose to focus on practices linked to art, called arts-based learning; research has observed such practices for more than twenty years as they aim to foster creativity in organizations both at individual and collective levels.

Appearance of art-based learning in organizations

The idea has developed that creativity can be imported in organizations from a world where it is supposed to be abundant: art (Berthoin Antal, 2009). Consequently, projects between artists and companies have blossomed for twenty years. Such projects are called by researchers arts-based methods (Taylor & Ladkin, 2009), arts-based learning (Flamand, Perret, & Picq, 2022) or artistic interventions organizations (Sköldberg et al., 2016). Some academics speak of transformational artistic interventions in organizations as their aim is to change the way organizations operate (Debenedetti & Perret, 2019).

The theoretical justification of these practices is based directly on the contribution of creative skills within the organization, which the presence of the artist is supposed to generate. Art is thus supposed to reinforce agility, artfulness (Darsø, 2004; Nissley, 2010), and consequently leadership (Adler, 2006) among people in contact with it. Artists can directly share skills that are necessary in the art world by explaining in specific settings (conferences, seminars, etc.) how they work. But this process can also happen in an informal way. The organizers of artistic interventions in organizations then assume that the contact between artists and employees will trigger informal discussions and debates. Such encounters are supposed to make employees realize how they can be inspired by artistic skills in their own work. As explained in

introduction, most of the time, an intermediary (usually a consulting company or a dedicated expert) helps to design the whole intervention to answer to an organizational issue – especially, they usually find the most relevant artist to involve in the intervention (Berthoin Antal, 2012).

Despite the success encountered in the organizational field by arts-based methods, Ancelin-Bourguignon, Dorsett & Azambuja (2020) study the notion of creativity and its variations in art and management to show that these two versions of creativity have nothing to do with each other, condemning all interventions to be "lost in translation". Based on the observations of Boltanski and Chiapello (2007), they consider impassable differences that prevent any decent importation of artistic skills in the world of organizations. We display these differences in table 1 below.

	Art	Management
Creative person	Everybody is creative	Everybody is creative under favorable conditions
	Both thinkers and implementers	(Only) producing ideas
Creative product	Not utility-oriented	Relevant and useful
	Assessed by critics and audiences	Assessed by experts
Creative process	Mysterious and inexplicable	Modelled as a structured process
Creative place	Change in societal norms	Usual levels of analysis (individual, group and organization)
	Representing gift economy and figures of non-utility	Specific organizational characteristics and arrangements enhance creativity

Table 1: Impassable conceptual differences between artistic and organizational creativity (adapted from Ancelin-Bourguignon & al., 2020)

Many elements from this table appear questionable. For instance, the orientation of art towards inutility was depicted as a social construct of Romanticism, non applicable to other periods like Italian Renaissance or Contemporary art (Baxandall, 1988; Bourdieu, 1996); besides, the creative process reveals itself as methodical work (Menger, 2018; Blonski, 2024); the creative place is first of all dedicated to artistic work and not to changing society (Blonski, Paris & Poinsignon, 2024), etc. But in this article, we will not criticize this model from Ancelin-Bourguignon et al. in detail: our aim is to consider the main idea it conveys. Indeed, if the problem of artistic interventions in organizations is translation and the transfer of creativity from artist to organization, it seems appropriate to observe how organizations and artists can

find a basis for exchange. To understand how translation work would reconcile managerial creativity and artistic creativity, we propose to go back to the very notion of translation.

The role of translation

The theory of translation was conceived by its authors as a way of explaining how certain actions, certain devices and certain actors could allow two worlds foreign to each other to better understand each other. The seminal article by Callon (1984) shows how the identification of the actors involved and the questions which link them made it possible to bring together a very heterogeneous set of actors with different issues around a common problem. Laying out the questions and issues becomes the starting point for translation by identifying the necessary crossing points and the convergence of the interests of the different actors.

The different perceptions of creativity by the economic world on the one hand and the artistic world on the other seem to us to be a conducive ground for the use of this theory to bring them together as authors of a shared notion and practices. However, the theories of translation and the actor network offer a particularly relevant theoretical framework for the study of innovation processes through the progressive commitment of different actors and the construction of unplanned alliances (Bobadilla, Goransson, & Pichault, 2019).

As Walsh and Renaud (2010) point out, Callon in his study "*emphasises that the parties involved in a controversy develop contradictory arguments and perspectives leading to different visions of the world around them*". It is these stakeholders that we will find as actors, engaged in what constitutes translation in this theory, namely "*the result of a negotiation between different parties*".

In the case of an artistic intervention in an organisation (AIO), the actors and their issues (or obstacles) are as follows:
- The organisation that calls on an artist, and more specifically, the *manager* who has taken the decision to call on them (rather than choosing another technique for developing the organisational creativity of their team). For the manager, the main issue is that their team is not (enough) creative.
- The *team members* who are going to take part in the AIO, as well as *the set-up* that may be put in place by the artist: these are the actors, human and non-human. The issue for the team members taking part to the AIO is that they are reluctant to engage emotionally

and that they fear to make mistakes. On the other side, for the set-up to be efficient, the participants have to trust the experiment and to be self-confident.

- The *artist* mobilised for this AIO. For them the issue is that they are often convinced that only artists are truly creative.

- The *intermediary*, the person who made the link between the organisation and the artist, no doubt at the request of the manager, and who probably chose the artist based on the organisation's request: this is the translator. Nobre and Zawadzki (2015) point out that it is up to the translator to build his or her own legitimacy, because his or her translation competes with the translations that each of the other players might make. Their role is crucial right from the start of the process, because it is their analysis that enables the problematisation (Walsh & Renaud, 2010).

The obligatory passage point (Walton, 2013) is the gradual realisation of a collective work of art within a limited timeframe as this is the objective accepted by all the participants.

Convergence is generally achieved through a four-stage process: i) problematisation, ii) interest, iii) enlistment and iv) mobilisation of allies (Nobre & Zawadzki, 2015; Walsh & Renaud, 2010).

i.   Problematisation enables the identification, in particular thanks to the translator, of the various obstacles and problems that the stakeholders will have to overcome in order to align themselves. At this stage, the tensions and controversies resulting from the divergence of the stakeholders emerge.

ii. During the next phase, known as the interest phase, the translator will try to overcome these obstacles by forming unusual alliances (Bobadilla et al., 2019), thereby changing the boundaries between the players.

iii. During the next enrolment phase, the stakeholders, who were interested during the previous phase, act around an object or artefact and develop a common language.

iv. The final mobilisation phase brings all the stakeholders into the conversation.

This leads us to ask the following research question: how does translation overcome the blockage in the transfer of creativity from the artist to the organization?

Methodology

On an empirical level, our research finds its source in an initial astonishment: in France, for several years, the subject of Art & Business has been particularly brought up to date; however,

in practice, the actors of these two worlds often seem doubtful about the fruitful projects that can arise from them. Yet the number of intermediary structures designing and managing artistic interventions in organizations is increasing. On a theoretical level, we drew on the article of Ancelin-Bourguignon et al. (2020) which was criticizing the mere possibility of a transfer of skills (creativity) from artists to organizations. Both these approaches led us to focus on intermediaries, as this actor has a major contact with the other parts, artists and managers. As their job consists in designing the whole project by bringing together artists and managers, they tend to get a greater overview of the intervention and its actors.

Our exploratory approach leads us to resort to a methodology grounded on semi-structured interviews. In fact, our goal is to understand the practices happening in this context and their signification (Alvesson, 2003). This implies leaving the players themselves to explain the meaning they give to the practices observed. Following, we conducted several interviews in two different phases.

As a first stage of our research, we conducted 8 interviews with the intermediaries. They can be independent entrepreneurs, or part of dedicated consulting companies, or even members of dedicated associations. They share a common characteristic: all of them have designed and managed artistic interventions in organizations, by bringing artists in an organizational context at the request of organizations themselves.

When we had the opportunity to explore greater projects, involving more players, we went deeper in the exploration of the artistic intervention. As a second stage, in those cases, we interviewed the artists who were involved (4 artists in total) along with participating managers and those responsible for the project, most of the time the CEO or a member of the board (4 people in total). We display our interviews and their characteristics in table 2 below.

By going back and forth between fieldwork and theoretical questions, our approach was resolutely abductive (Dumez, 2021). Our first interviews allowed us to understand the importance of the intermediary's role as translator in the successful management of projects. This then led us to explore the literature on translation, then to question the specificities of translation between two approaches to creativity: that of artists and that of organizations.

Interview	Date	Duration	Output
Manager 1 (CEO)	November 2020	30 min	Notes
Intermediary 1	January 2023	55 min	Notes
Intermediary 2	February 2023	80 min	Recording & Transcription
Intermediary 3	March 2023	80 min	Recording & Transcription
Artist 1	April 2023	70 min	Recording & Transcription
Artist 2	April 2023	70 min	Recording & Transcription
Intermediary 4	April 2023	50 min	Recording & Transcription
Manager 2 (CEO)	April 2023	25 min	Recording & Transcription
Artist 3	May 2023	50 min	Recording & Transcription
Manager 3 (AD)	May 2023	40 min	Recording & Transcription
Artist 4	May 2023	60 min	Recording & Transcription
Intermediary 5	June 2023	50 min	Recording & Transcription
Intermediary 6	December 2023	50 min	Recording & Transcription
Manager 4 (COO)	January 2024	40 min	Recording & Transcription
Intermediary 7	Avril 2024	60 min	Recording & Transcription
Intermediary 8	May 2024	50 min	Recording & Transcription

Table 2: summary of the interviews

The processing of our material allowed us to identify the categories presented in the results section. We based our analysis on the fundamental questions that structured the interviews: what were the stated objectives of AIOs and how were they (or were they not) achieved? Finally, what obstacles were encountered and how were they overcome? Then, we started a thematic analysis of the content provided by our interviews (Bernard, Ryan, & Wutich, 2016). The aim was to consider both concepts found in existing literature (especially about translation) and the questions raised by the different people we interviewed. This approach allowed several iterations between the strata of coding: between theory and emerging elements, but also with other AIOs observed by academic literature. At last, we observed similarities and differences between all these elements to build more relevant categories and codes (Locke, Feldman, & Golden-Biddle, 2022). This mixed approach allowed us to organize our data into categories both coming from theory and emerging from the field (Ayache & Dumez, 2011) that allowed us to answer our research question: under what conditions is it useful and possible to import creativity from the arts into management?

Results

The analysis of our results followed the entities at work in each AIO project as we described above: the managers sponsoring the project, the artist, the intermediary, and the participants. We propose to take a closer look at the functioning of each entity to understand their relative importance in a potential translation process.

a) Sponsoring managers

Our data show that organizations play a key role in initiating AIOs. Their role has become increasingly important as their relations with the art world have evolved over the last twenty years. Incentives for corporate philanthropy have enabled companies to consider projects that start out as conventional, and then seek more far-reaching benefits than a simple purchase of artworks or residencies. The idea was that artists could share not only the results of their work, but also the processes involved in achieving them. Our interviews tend to show that this thinking echoes the development of the managerial discourse on creativity. As a result, new players have emerged to meet this demand: some artists have specialized in corporate projects (which we explore below), and intermediary structures have developed.

> "Thanks to the sponsorship law, a number of new players have entered the ecosystem" (Intermediary)
> "They were sort of business seminars, we'd arrive with lots of gear and talk about creative processes to encourage people to make things too" (Intermediary)

Within these organizations, artistic interventions are most often initiated by a manager commissioning the project. In general, this is a member of the board or top management. This observation points to a certain fragility such interventions as they are grounded on an individual desire or sensitivity to art, which is sometimes criticized within organizations.

> "When we do a project with a company, it's because the manager is already culturally aware" (Intermediary)

In short, the aim of managers in these organizations is to improve the creativity of their teams. However, their main obstacle is a lack of understanding between organizational and artistic logics, the compatibility of which some find difficult to envisage.

b) Artists

There are many reasons why artists get involved in organizational projects. Some take a dim view of working with companies, but others, quite the opposite, have seized a significant number of opportunities with them.

First, artists find contexts for artistic exploration and innovation in companies that they would not have been able to experience without these projects. Artists are brought into contact with materials that are often new to their practice. The products manufactured and the machines used by the organizations become a source of inspiration and new ideas that the artists could not have had in other contexts. This involvement in a context of economic production also appears to the artists as a way of coming out of their ivory towers and confronting reality.

> "It allowed artists to discover worlds to which they would never otherwise have had access" (Artist)
> "I think it's healthier not to be disconnected as an artist (...) and it contributes to my thinking, I like this questioning" (Artist)
> "When I was selected [for the project], they let a kid have fun in a toy store" (Artist)

The organizational context offers another major advantage thanks to its financial and human resources: artists can plan to build new tools and large-scale resources as part of their interventions, which contributes to enriching artistic innovation. This financial advantage is also reflected in the remuneration negotiated with the organizations, as well as in the visibility given to the project thanks to the professional network.

> "It allowed me to make quite monumental works for a young artist who didn't have the means" (Artist)
> "[After the intervention] she had an exhibition at the Samaritaine and we bought artworks from her as well" (Intermediary)
> "It was interesting, we were able to attract quite a few people, 200 to 300, it was also political, there was the Prefect and the CEO of [the listed company]" (Artist)
> "I bought equipment for the project, a camera and a computer to work on it" (Artist)

The artists' aim here is not only to share but also to develop his artistic practice. The obstacle they face is that their practice is the only form of creativity they know, which can be potentially difficult to sell to organizations.

c) The intermediary

Our data reveal a central role for intermediaries in the management of artistic interventions in organizations. This is due first and foremost to the expertise and network they possess for this type of hybrid project. Their role starts with designing and matchmaking: they are contacted by organizations who outline their objectives, which are often broad (e.g. "to increase team

creativity", as seen above). They then have to concretely imagine the project that can meet these objectives and, above all, find the artists most compatible with these projects.

> "Just because companies decide to do this doesn't mean they know how to do it, so they lean on those who do" (Intermediary)

However, the role of intermediaries will increase as the project moves on. Aware of the serendipity inherent in the artistic approach, they will have to promote unexpected results and show how artistic production can help to solve organizational problems.

> "Artist are artists, it's a cultural production, sometimes it crashes, they have a blank, they're not doing well, that's it. And then I take over. Well, because I know his work and I know what's useful to the company, and that's the difficulty" (Intermediary)
>
> "I act like a consultant, which means I listen to the company's problem, knowing that there's a willingness to open up to different methods" (Intermediary).

Finally, intermediaries act as an interface between artists and organizations, defusing areas of tension. This means, first and foremost, responding to financial criticisms: organizations may criticize artists for setting a price that is not based on anything concrete in their eyes; conversely, artists find it hard to understand that they have to provide proof of their commitment for the organization to take them seriously.

> "You need cultural mediation around an artistic project, otherwise people spit on it" (Intermediary)
>
> "You can let off steam, because I'm the one receiving the criticism and not the artist directly (...) I can mop up to redistribute a few drops between the two. It's a bit of an absorbing wall" (Intermediary)
>
> "It was a war I waged with the communications department (...) fortunately there was the association as a mediator" (Artist)
>
> "She says to me, the intermediary, you note how many hours you spend, you note, you note" (Artist)

In short, the intermediary has to organize the intervention in concrete terms, which means finding the right artist and format, and then defending these choices as the project progresses. This is made all the more difficult by a major obstacle: the intermediary has to deal with players who each have their own vision of creativity.

  d) Participants

Paradoxically, participants in artistic interventions in organizations appear to be in a class of their own. They are the first to be affected by the intervention, but they are rarely the decision-makers in its implementation. Their role is to some extent a passive one, designed to ensure that the intervention goes off without a hitch, just like any other corporate event decided by their management. In the worst-case scenario, some of the participants are frontally opposed to an event whose price could be saved to give a bonus instead. The whole point of the intervention is to capture their attention and convince them of its relevance. This means having to deal with a certain "wait-and-see" attitude on their part: since they don't dare reveal their thoughts or criticisms (the main obstacle), it's all the more difficult to meet the objective set by the organization, which is to develop their creativity - in a way, whether they like it or not. However, the contact with the artist, a profession surrounded by a certain aura, can make it easier for participants to get involved, reinforcing their participation in the co-creation of the work.

> "At first, they're all like 'yeah, I could be an artist too', but when we get to headquarters and do the event, they're all happy (...) There's a transition in time from the employee's point of view" (Intermediary).
> "A lot of people on the site were ready to help us, to tell us what was going to happen: "if you stand there, you'll get a better view for your video" (Artist)

By considering the various interests and obstacles of the entities observed, we can arrive at a synthetic picture of how they get along in order to achieve their respective objectives, along the lines of translation theory.
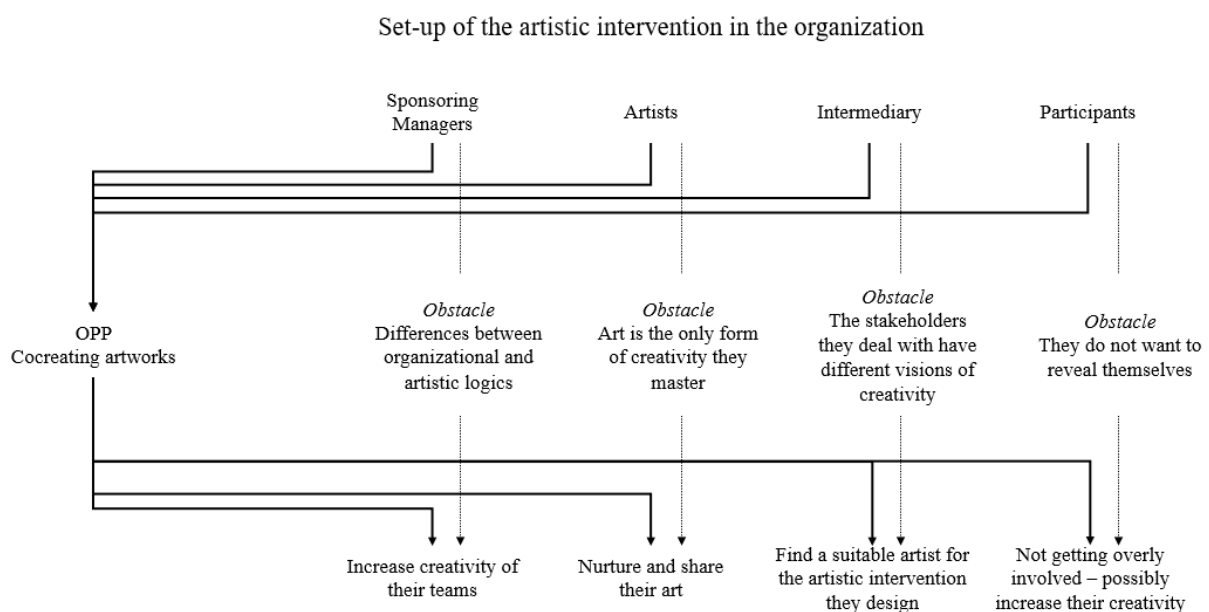

Fig.1: Translation process (Callon, 1986) in artistic interventions in organizations

Discussion (in progress)

Our analysis leads us to two main elements. First, it provides an answer to the problem posed by Ancelin-Bourguignon & al. (2020) concerning the obstacles to translation between art and management. Second, it helps to explain the concrete implications of artistic interventions in organizations for creativity and organizational innovation.

The mechanism at work within AIOs is not so much a transfer of skills – here, creativity – but rather the actualization of potential creativity among the actors of the organizations. In this sense, we provide clarification about Ancelin-Bourginon & al (2020): certainly, the creativity of artists and creativity within organizations does indeed seem to be two distinct forms of creativity. This also justifies the need to call on intermediaries who will play a translator role in order to be able to carry out the AIO. Nevertheless, the presence of the artist within the organization allows a liberation of speech and practices.

The translation process, as it allows the meeting of several worlds and thus provokes as much displacement as mediation, allows the emergence of new and unforeseen ideas: in a word, creativity. Translation creates the context that forces participants to move beyond the barriers they have unconsciously erected around their own creativity. Time constraint and emulation, example of the artist's fantasy which demonstrates that it is possible to mobilize it, sequence "out of time" in relation to usual daily work, all these elements combine to help participants re-tame their creativity. Creativity thus becomes accessible thanks to an experience which in a certain way unlocks creativity and allows participants to feel legitimate about this skill again. And if it is not sufficient, it nevertheless remains the first step in the innovation process.

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