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The foreign made familiar – a process breeding new thinking?

Experiences from a Swedish artist-workplace interaction project

In this paper, the issue of whether a Swedish artist in residence project, Airis, resulted in any development or change for the participating workplaces and artists will be discussed. It will also address the impact of projects such as Airis on working life and artists.

The Airis project

Airis, an artist-workplace interaction project, was initiated by Skådebanan Västra Götaland, a non-profit independent organisation with the overall aim of enabling more people to access the arts. It has been executed in the Gothenburg area in two succeeding versions or phases in 2002-2004, and will continue with a third phase in 2004-2005.

The form of the project is free interaction between an artist and a workplace, where the artist is resident at the workplace during a number of months. The artists work one day a week with the project, and the employees of the workplaces participate in their spare time or during working hours in different types of creative activities, with e.g. production of a film or photography artwork, or in creative exercises or attended lectures on art. The artists and the workplaces develop the detailed plans for interaction after an initial phase where the artist is introduced to the employees and activities of the workplace.

Research study and method

A research study of Airis was undertaken in the form of an independent evaluation of the project, commissioned by Skådebanan Västra Götaland. The study is based on repeated interviews with representatives of the workplaces, the artists, and staff at Skådebanan during the whole of project. The research study departed from the following main questions: How did the workplaces develop due to the project? How did the artists develop due to the project? Were the aims of the project fulfilled?

Aims of the project

The aim of the Airis project was to deepen the relationship between the arts sector and working life by a) creating new interfaces between the arts sector and working life through process-oriented co-operation; b) developing the creative potential of the workplace, and thereby strengthening its competitiveness; and c) broadening the market for artists and inspire to new working methods.

The overall aim of Skådebanan Västra Götaland is to increase the number of people who have access to cultural experiences. They do this mainly by furthering the communication and interaction between working life and the arts sector. The Airis project was developed as a way to renew the forms of this interaction and communication. In this sense, Airis can be said to aim at change in both the work and art spheres, towards an increased interchange for the benefit of both.

What changes occurred?

Were the aims of the project fulfilled?

For the employees the project enabled and offered pleasurable breaks from the everyday work routines, with stimulating and challenging encounters with art and engagement in creative exercises. The employees also got a deeper understanding of artistic work and the artist as a professional. Some employees also stated that they got new insights in their own profession and work. For the managers, the project offered an opportunity to inspire the employees and creating a better work environment. The project was also a way of training the employees in thinking in new ways. Personnel interested in the arts enjoyed the possibility of consuming culture during working hours, whereas it could not be shown that the project resulted in an increase in interest for the arts among employees who were not previously regular consumers of the arts. The artists who participated

in the project joined it because they wanted to try something new, and saw it as a chance to develop as artists, even though they did not know exactly how. The chance of being employed for a period was also attracting to them. Through the project, the artist discovered a new way of working, and together with a public that was quite different from what they are used to in their normal arts context. The interaction with the public was longer, and the artists had to face them more intimately and repeatedly, which they usually do not when they work with their own forms of expression.

The artists saw the form of interaction with a workplace as a possible way of working even in the future, but at the same time several of the artists lacked the time and resources to work with their own forms of expression within the confines of the project. A few of the artists entered the project with the intent of working for the workplace, focussing their demands and wishes with their specific skills, and considering the whole project as a new way of working on, that was a supplement to their own artistic work, which is performed more in isolation from a public until its public display. The experiences of the intervention gave all the artists ideas for their artistic work, but also impulses for changes in their way of working as artists. The three objectives with the Airis project, and the overall aim, can all be said to have an ambition to incur changes to both the work and art spheres. The question remains if the overall objective of the project, to deepen the relationship between working life and the cultural sector, was fulfilled. It depends on what level of ambition the aims of the project are perceived as having. It is difficult to say that the project by itself has made an impact in a larger context, but may be one element in a process of change that takes place at several locations, and may add to a deepened relationship between the two spheres in a future. On the individual workplace level, there can be said to be an impact at least among those involved in the project, but if the project has had an impact on the organisations at large is difficult to say anything about. The question if the second aim was fulfilled is also difficult to answer. Some of the interviewed employees stated that they got new impulses for their own work, whereas other stated that they did not find the art presented and present as at all related to their work. But those employees who were positive towards the project, and had actively participated, claimed that the feel-good effect of the project spread to their work and interaction with fellow employees, and in this way had a positive impact on the whole work environment. Whether the project has contributed to a strengthened competitiveness of the workplace is not possible to answer. One individual project does not change the dynamics of such a complex structure as a workplace. Nevertheless, the workplaces claimed to be satisfied with what the project had resulted in. The breach between art and work is both the strength and weakness of the Airis project. The managers saw the project as an element of a broader effort for enhancing the work environment and creative thinking among the employees. They were well aware of the long-sightedness needed in engagement in arts related activities, and had a trust in the long-term impact of art activities even though they could not point to apparent results, as wished, with the project. In the light of this, it is interesting to note the difficulties to measure the results of the Airis project in a broader or longer perspective. It seems conviction of the invisible effects of an encounter with art and artists on workplaces is at the very basis of its possibilities, and also an acknowledgement of measures and dimensions that are not easily made explicit.

Not an artist in residence project

The project has by Skådebanan been described as an artist in residence project (the name Airis, was in fact meant to be an acronym for "artist in residence"). On a closer inspection and after a comparison with the meaning of the notion in the art world, it is clear that there are difficulties with applying this notion to the project. The role of art creation within a project such as Airis is interesting to discuss, but does not fit within the limits of this paper.

Short description of the eight individual artist/workplace co-operation projects of Airis (phase II, 2003-2004) in the Gothenburg area:

Visual artist **Leif Skoog** and **NovAseptic AB**. The company is an innovation-intensive company developing and producing technical systems and solutions for the medical industry. It is in a strong growth phase, and is concerned about how it can maintain its entrepreneurial qualities while growing. The number of employees is c. 70 in Sweden and abroad. The artist started to discuss the company with employees and managers, and became a facilitator for deepened discussion of what the company is, and if there is a company soul in the growing organisation. The discussions and thoughts of staff were materialised in a film that was produced by the employees themselves, with the artist again as facilitator. The artist has used site specific and processual approaches before in his artistic work, departing from the organisation or situation in relation to which he is to act as artist.

Dancer and choreographer **Veera Suvalo Grimberg** and **Aspen Petroleum AB**. The company produces environmentally adapted petroleum products and has c. 40 employees. The dancer presented dance films and produced new dances for the employees of the company, and also initiated discussions in the employee lunch break room through lectures on dance. She was also an active part of social activities of the employees, performing various pieces. The apparent lack of connections between the work of the employees and the dancer provoked thoughts about cultural policy and new perspectives on different kinds of work. The encounter with the dancer was very welcomed by the employees as they very positively to her as an individual.

Visual artist **Anna Persson** and **Astra Zeneca Research & Development**. The clinical research department with c. 650 employees at Astra Zeneca has developed a programme for increased creativity and innovation, and the invitation of an artist was seen as a way to strengthen this programme. The artist initiated a number of workshops where the employees played with and rendered the guiding principles of the company in the form of silhouette photographs.

Audio artist **Jesper Norda** and **Volvo Technology AB**. The company is a consultancy company within the Volvo car group, concerned with research & development. The artist

worked closely with employees of the department for human-system interaction with c. 30 employees in a project aiming at developing new warning signals for cars. He developed new sounds that were incorporated in the ordinary testing routine for sounds, and contributed with specific audio skills to the company.

Dramatist **Petra Revenue** and **Bostadsbolaget AB**. The department for cleaners of housing estates at the municipal company for housing in Gothenburg has roughly 70 employees. They have been involved in a programme for better work routines and work ambiance for a year, which has resulted in a higher satisfaction among employees. They saw the project as a way to strengthen the development process. The dramatist has talked with the cleaners about their work conditions and their identities on and outside work. Together, they developed a series of sketches, a fashion show, and a film based on the individuals and the work environment of the cleaners. The urge to make the persons visible both as professionals and as individuals was central for the co-operation.

Visual artist **Gunilla Hansson** and **Arbetslivsinstitutet Väst**. Arbetslivsinstitutet Väst is a state-funded multidisciplinary research organisation focussed on working life and working conditions. At this research centre (one of a number in Sweden) they are 25 employees. They have recently initiated an internal discussion of the ambiance of their workplace. The artist had creativity workshops with the employees and presented the works and oeuvres of other artists, and thus offered a different kind of creative work than that represented by the employed researchers.

Actor **Claudio Salgado** and **Vinninga elementary school**. The school struggles with a possible downsizing, and saw the project as a way to introduce fresh perspectives on their work. The school has around 40 employees. The actor engaged in individual communication with the employees, and through discussions and contributions from the employees concerning the question of what it means to be a teacher, and also produced a film based on this material.

Composer **Anna Eriksson** and **Falbygdens lärcenter** (Kompetens och arbetslivsförvaltning). Falbygdens lärcenter is a centre for education that comprised adult education from elementary to university level, and has c. 90 employees. They recently restructured their entire organisation, a measure which caused tensions and uneasiness within the organisation. The artist initially asked for suggestions from the employees, and worked with these. She decorated a room for resting, organised choir and voice exercises, and gave lectures on music with invited musicians.

Katja Lindqvist

Petra Revenue

In my everyday life I'm a writer for stage and television, but during this period I worked with the cleaningsection of a large company (Babservice) that rents out flats in

Gothenburg. I worked with 30 cleaninglady's (there is no other title for this profession) and 2 men once a week during a 10 month period. 60 % of the staff came from other countries and cultures.

Why?

Before I started to write for a living I studied Social Anthropology at the University in Gothenburg , and I think this airisproject was involving as much anthropology as art to tell you the truth. BabService is a company with a strong hierarchy and a rigid social structure, the management and the workers only meet twice a year, once before summer vacation and once at the annual Christmas party...where they still sat at different tables and hardly ever interacted.

I realised after 2 months of drinking coffee (we had an 8 weeks observation period included in the contract with Skådebanan) that my cleaninglady's felt totally invisible.

My task for the project...

... became to change that and make them visible. I wanted to hold up a mirror in front of the whole company, so they could see their own hierarchy and structure. But in an humoristic way.

I decided to stage a small cabaret about the company, with my lady's as the undisputable magnificent stars. Unfortunately they were not as enthusiastic as me, at least in the beginning, to complete this mission.

My major problem when I started to work more practically (with simple drama exercises) was that my crew, or ensemble if you like, had absolutely no self confidence. They were, with no exceptions shy, hesitant and felt like idiots, mostly because their Swedish was bad or nonexisting, and they had no pride in their everyday work. They just wanted to get it over with.

One of them told me after our first session that she felt like a tiger in the Zoo, and that she felt raped by the management when she was participating in my project. I here have to point out that I did not force anyone to participate. Many of them joined me because, as one woman from Bosnia put it "at least its better than vacuuming "

But after a while they started to see possibilities in the process, a chance to make their voices heard...and this I will speak more about when I see you on Saturday. I also want to bring up some of the more complicated issues that emerged during the project. I found it hard to find my role in the company...how do you avoid becoming an advertising board... how do you handle when your loyalties lands within one group of the company...how do you keep your critical position... and so on...

Petra Revenue