

The Role of Art and the Artist

Edgar H. Schein

Why is art relevant to other elements of society like business or government? Why should managers learn anything about art and the role of the artist? I have thought about this for years and have recently formulated some thoughts. I preface this short essay by noting that I have not done “research” in this area. Rather, I come at this from a personal point of view, both as a lifetime sketcher and as a clinician interested in seeing how artistic activity has affected my life and the lives of others with whom I have worked. The several “functions” of art and artists that I will describe below overlap and interact. I separate them to highlight the variety of functions that can be identified, once we reflect on this topic.

First, art and artists stimulate us to see more, hear more, and experience more of what is going on within us and around us.

As part of their training, artists expand their perceptual and expressive range. One of their key roles, then, is to help the rest of us see more, to broaden our perspectives, and to get in touch with both internal and external forces that we might otherwise not notice. This point applies particularly to the visual arts, but is probably also a factor in musical composition and performance arts. I suspect that composers and actors, like painters and sculptors, have to learn to see and hear before they can create. Many of the exercises through which artists learn how to “see” better are highly applicable to human situations we mismanage because we have not learned to see what is actually going on.

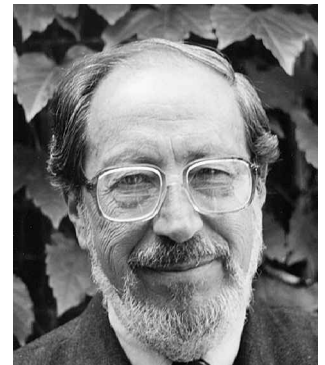
Second, art does and should disturb, provoke, shock, and inspire.

It is in the nature of culture formation that we seek stability and predictability in our environment. We all live in safe cocoons created by our occupation, social class, ethnicity, religion, group memberships, and family. These cocoons determine our perceptions and what we consider to be appropriate things to see and think.

Art and the artist communicate directly with elements of our unconscious and thereby encourage us to broaden the range of perceptions and feelings that we allow ourselves. Art should and does force us to look at what we normally avoid because it is disturbing, anxiety provoking, politically incorrect. Art focuses squarely on precisely those things that are forbidden in our daily discourse. It is often the only medium in which societal hypocrisy can be exposed because we can rationalize art as being “only art,” not reality. Yet that is precisely why art is needed and is potentially so powerful.

Third, the artist can stimulate us to broaden our skills, our behavioral repertory, and our flexibility of response.

Through legitimizing and stimulating improvisation, the artist, particularly the performing artist, can help us to overcome “knee jerk” reactions and old habits. Many of our habits are stable because we have never thought about alternatives or taken the risk of trying them. It is surprising once we are seduced into trying some improvisation exercises how liberating and educational this experience can be. In a similar vein, to the extent that art shocks or stimulates, it allows us to surface feelings that we may not have been aware of in ourselves. Incorporating those feelings into our emotional repertory and acting on them makes us richer and more flexible human beings.



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Fourth, the role of the arts and artists is to stimulate and legitimize our own aesthetic sense.

We talk about “beautiful” plays on the football field, or the “beauty” of a sales plan, or the “beauty” of an intervention that a consultant made, but we don’t talk about or consider what it is that makes it beautiful. We don’t really analyze or reflect upon the aesthetic dimension partly because we do not have any conceptual tools or principles to draw on. The artist can teach us what the elements of beauty are and legitimize the importance of beauty in all elements of our lives.

Fifth, analysis of how the artist is trained and works can produce important insights into what is needed to perform and what it means to lead and manage.

By analyzing the skills that underlie different art forms, one can gain insight into what is needed to perform in general. For example, the painter is not only dependent on a creative muse to tell him or her what would be worth rendering on a canvas. He or she needs specific knowledge and skills such as color theory, drawing skill, ability to see clearly what is to be rendered, theory of perspective, eye-hand coordination, and the capacity to draw on her or his own emotional and unconscious self. A poet needs to have a large vocabulary and a sense of how to put words together, including an ear for rhyming, if that is part of the poetic expression. A composer of music needs to be able to manage the technical skills of composition as well as be able to play relevant instruments.

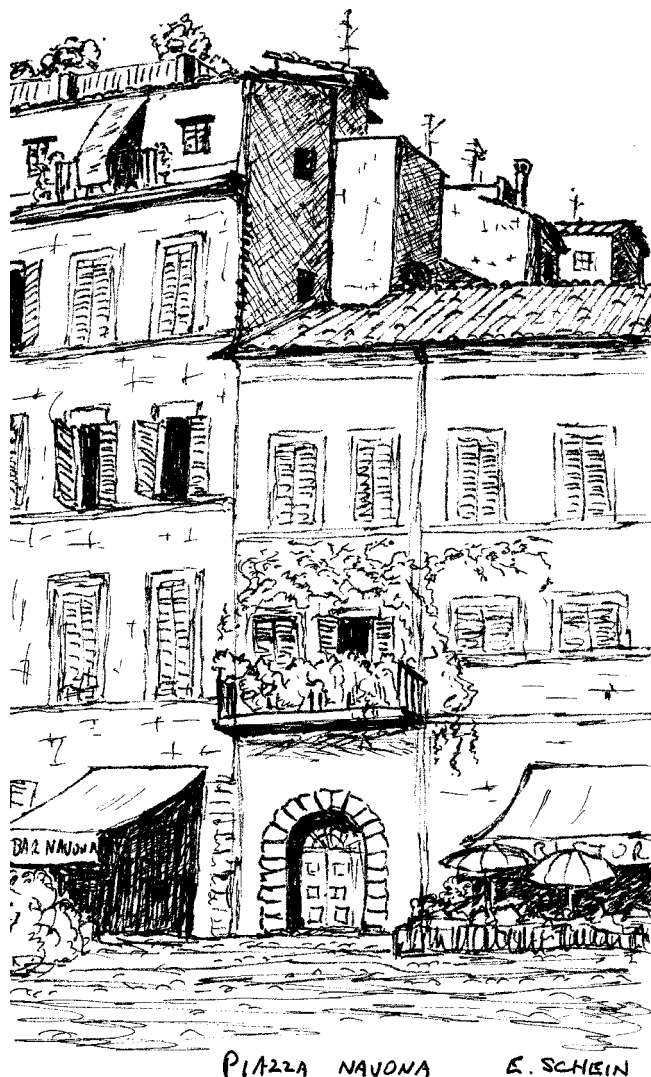
When we move to the performing arts such as orchestras, string quartets, and jazz bands, we encounter a whole other set of skills such as the ability to read music, to play the instrument competently, to relate to the other performers and the conductor, and, most importantly, the ability to improvise.

The ability to improvise creatively is perhaps the most relevant of these skills in terms of applicability to organizations because the performance of leaders and managers is not as scripted as musical performance is. Leaders, managers, and organizers are more like composers who write a score for others to perform. Team members create the performance from their reading of the score, their interaction with each other, and the signals they get from their leaders, customers, and subordinates. Because they have to respond to so many often conflicting signals and cues, improvisation becomes all the more necessary.

Improvisation in a team is, of course, much more complicated than individual improvisation such as individual performing artists, teachers, and consultants engage in. In order for the team to perform well, each member thinks in terms of delivering a line that will enable another member to get off a good line, rather than thinking of a good line for him or herself. In business, consulting, teaching, sales, and other interactive professions, one realizes if one is at all reflective that improvisation is the major performance element in all of these occupations.

Sixth, and most important of all, the artist puts us in touch with our creative self.

By emphasizing creativity as an intrinsic aspect of all reality, the artist invites us to look at reality in a different way; reality is not out there to be seen and appreciated. Rather, reality is perpetually constructed through our own daily creative activities. Or perhaps a better way to put this is to say that the important part of reality, the part that matters, is the part that we create for ourselves through those activities that we own and in which we express ourselves.



I am reminded of a story from the Korean POW camps in which the prisoners were only allowed occasional recreation by floating on a raft in the river abutting the camp. One of the highlights of these outings was to play a joke on the guards. It was forbidden to leave the rafts, but invariably a prisoner would “fall” into the water causing the guards to rush over to pull him out, at which point another prisoner on the other side of the raft would “fall” into the water, and so on. In the same vein, assembly-line workers are notorious for their ability to creatively invent systems and procedures that defeat some of management’s goals.

The artistic is with us all the time, but if we do not pay more attention to the role of art and the artist in our society, we run the risk of not noticing how much more effective and happy we might be if we allowed the artist within ourselves to emerge more explicitly and consciously!