

What Art Can Do - Envisioning a role for artists in wicked problems

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As a composer I was able to find out how music is much more than nice sounds and melodies. I could see how it could give a voice to young people that struggle to find their identity. In Damascus, before Syria broke into chaos, I experienced how young artists pictured a rich and positive future through music. Later, I experienced how music enabled traumatized refugees to express their feelings and share their stories.

Besides all this, I experienced the reality of life as an artist, the daily struggle to get projects off the ground, to find funding and collect audiences. I am aware that attention and connection have become scarce resources in a world that is full of distraction, mere entertainment and noise. It struck me how often artists and their audience have a superficial relationship, lacking interaction. Their separate lives only touch each other during a performance, concert or exhibition, in a very traditional division of roles: the active artist on stage, and a passive receiving audience in seats, listening.

This division of roles is a problem. Idealism, imagination and creativity have become professionalised. These have become isolated values, bound to the artist practise, specific non-profits or enterprises with a dedicated target.

I believe the mindset of an artist has a role to play in all places that deal with complexity and so-called “wicked problems”. All professionals that strive for innovation and development in the field of sustainability need these three key aspects of the arts:

1. Imagination; the vision to see a better world.
2. Play; the capacity to experiment, to fail and try again.
3. Beauty; a recognition of the value of harmony, health and balance.

The challenges of our current time depend on an acceleration of solutions and ideas. Therefore, we need to dramatically increase the space for the artist mindset in places that deal with wicked problems.

This is not easy. Artists not only work different and use a different environment to develop and expose their work. They also think different from other professionals.

In a world that urgently needs solutions for pressing problems, there seems no time to waste and this pressure results in attachment to a familiar way of working, focused on clear expectations, linear predictions direct results. Experiments with imagination, beauty and play hardly take place because there is no space to experiment, no time, no room for failure.

In this way, The way we see the problem is the problem.

I propose to never work on solving wicked problems when there is no seat on the table for the artist mindset. When we only apply rational and functional thinking and processes, we desengage a whole hemisphere of the human brain. Without imagination, beauty and play, we miss an essential dimension to our human capacity. A loss that might turn out to be fatal.

It's not easy to combine a conventional way of solving problems with the artists mindset. We might be lost in translation when we mix different languages and working styles. I have a few steps though that can provide a way to start working together.

First of all, the artists mindset is not a way to create art, but a way to see the world. Second, the artists mindset invites complexity into the picture. Instead of simplifying the situation, it allows a full spectrum to enter it's perception.

And then: the essence of the artists mindset, is it's dedication to the highest quality of questions. The artist may pose a remarkable query to research even a familiar problem. She might slow down and investigate a very personal or imaginative dimension for example, or bring non-verbal ways of questioning into the mix.

The artist journey is not trying to "solve complexity" but rather to accept complexity and become part of it.

A laboratory for "the art of beautiful questions" might be the place where science and art can touch each other. I present an online platform, organized around the 17 SDG's, where artists share their creative questions that are the core of their projects.

In this new space, a breakthrough can be born as beautiful, imaginative and playful minds of both artists and scientists find each other.