

Consulting as Art

The Meaning of Art

Within art theory there are major disagreements on the nature, locus and meaning of art. Intentional, formalist, reception and response, and symptomatic theories vie with one another to decide exactly what the locus of art is, and therefore where we can locate the meaning of an artwork and how we can develop valid interpretations of that art. All meaning exists in history; all meaning is marked by historicity. We cannot isolate meaning from the ongoing sweep of history. The only way that we know the artwork is by viewing and interpreting it, and it is those interpretations, which are grounded in history, that constitute the overall art. Therefore, any particular meaning of an artwork is simply the highlighting of a specific context. Hence, the interpretation of an artwork is found in evoking and elucidating that highlighted context. Furthermore, accurate interpretation means determining that a particular context is real and significant, a justification process that like any other involves a careful look at the evidence (Wilber, 1997).

In assessing and responding to conflict, it is no different; it is a search for the context within which this conflict can be interpreted and that is consistent with the evidence.

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As consultants, the interpretation of the stories of conflict told by the disputants is the heart of our work. These conflict-saturated stories are often contradictory, confusing, and misleading. Our work is to ‘make sense’ of these stories and make recommendations that encourage restoration and healing actions.

An art critic was reflecting on a painting of a sunset that had been done by Cézanne and commented, “That doesn’t look anything like a sunset.” Thinking for a moment, Cézanne said, “Then you don’t see sunsets the way that I do.” (Martinez, 1989 in Bolman and Deal, 1991). We have been influenced by Morgan’s notions (1980, 1986) that organizational consultants have relied too much on physical science metaphors of the world and too little on art and its efforts to foster such attributes as quality, commitment,

and creativity. Art, we acknowledge, is not a replacement for engineering but an enhancement, a different reflection of how to see the world of organizing.

Through the application of his or her art, the consultant allows for emotion, subtlety, and ambiguity to surface in ways that are useful to the organization (Bolman and Deal, 1991; Lang and Taylor, 2000). In a sense, the artist-as-consultant interprets the conflict and makes recommendations that are presented in a form that can be felt, understood, and appreciated by others in the organization. Responding to conflict in an organization is often one of artistry, which is neither exact nor precise. The consultant-as-artist is essential in helping the organization respond to the conflict with actions that will facilitate releasing the untapped individual and collective energies of the organization (Bolman and Deal, 1991).

This report challenges the Fine Arts Faculty to look for new ways to interpret and discover the meaning of their conflict. This destructive and bitter conflict is a challenge to their pretense of completeness.