

# ORGANIZATIONAL

Holding Space For Joy And Possibility



# PERFORMANCE

Alissa Schwartz

# ART

# **ORGANIZATIONAL PERFORMANCE ART**

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## FOREWORD

# WHY WRITE?

Why write a book? Shouldn't work be its own justification?...If this book has value, it is because in it I do something that I cannot do in "the work."...Although my ideas revolve around the work,...other things have entered as well....My studies of anthropology, social psychology, psychoanalysis, and gestalt therapy are the bases of my belief that performance theory is a social science.

RICHARD SCHECHNER

WHY WRITE A BOOK? THAT IS THE QUESTION THEATER director and performance studies professor Richard Schechner poses in the foreword to his book *Environmental Theater*, a work that has stirred me for more than thirty years and is one of the inspirations and muses for writing *this* book. Like Schechner, I took the liberty of writing my own foreword and used the same question "why write a book?" to share my influences and the context within which I write.

I decided to write about my work, because the work itself wasn't fully conveying what I wanted to express. In recent years, an additional something beyond my work called to me. It knocked at my door and whispered to be taken seriously: "Write. Create. Add your voice."

The last time I took on a massive writing project was my doctoral dissertation, around 2007, between babies. Sometimes I call it my third child. It was an examination of the interior world of social workers who work with children in foster care. Talking with these workers was one of the experiences that drove my interest in developing a consultation

practice that focuses on building positive and equitable organizational culture. Since 2011, I have consulted with nonprofit, social justice, and philanthropic organizations and communities, facilitating individual and group processes for transformational growth and culture building.

Like Schechner, I will also list formative influences of my work and life. They include social constructionist theory, working with Bread and Puppet Theater, studying and practicing performance art, immersing myself in the documentation of experimental ensemble theater work from the 1960s and '70s, studying and practicing social work and organizational psychology, and engaging in yoga, meditation, and shamanic journeying.

After a decade of consulting, it seemed that I was ready for my fourth child, a literary journey through the theories, practices, influences, and adventures that inform my work. It's my love child, really. A project I share with the world, born of a deep desire to understand how my first love, performance, informs my work and life.

This book expands the concepts and practices of avant-garde theater and performance art, applying them to organizational and community settings. It is the story of how I came to call my work Organizational Performance Art. It is structured and conceptualized as a series of interconnected chapters that begin with my definition of Organizational Performance Art and travel through the various historical, theoretical, and practice influences in the world of performance that contribute to my work, including avant-garde theater, social constructionism, space sense, and shamanic journeying.

I characterize an artistic sensibility as the embodiment of a high tolerance for ambiguity and emergence; understanding and playing with the social construction of reality; and working from a place of joy, expansiveness, and possibility. Most artists, narrowly defined, already know how to address the uncertainties in their lives with creativity. They're resilient and critical and fierce. This is a stance I strive to embody in my personal and professional practices. It's needed even more now, as we deal with massive social, political, and environmental trauma at the individual, institutional, and systemic levels. An artistic

stance toward organizational change invites creativity, positivity, interconnectedness, and collaboration.

The core force that propels my journey, both in theater and in organizational consulting, is a deep yearning for communal thriving and liberation. Organizational Performance Art does not just change organizations; it is a way of holding space for joy and possibility, harnessing imagination and a willingness to dance with the unknown in service to social justice and equity.

Organizational Performance Art is performative.

Organizational Performance Art is social constructionist.

Organizational Performance Art is shamanic.

It is holding space.

It is creating connective tissue.

It is a deep, visceral dance with the mysterious universe.

# ORGANIZATIONAL PERFORMANCE ART

“ORGANIZATIONAL PERFORMANCE ART” IS THE NAME I HAVE given to the consulting work I do. This term employs three words—“organizational,” “performance,” and “art”—in unexpected fashion. It includes pairings—“organizational performance” and “organizational art”—that relate to the larger concepts of performance and art, respectively. And the three words, when brought together, dance with the world of performance art. In this chapter I break down Organizational Performance Art into the three paired terms that reside within it—“organizational performance,” “organizational art,” and “performance art”—before looping back and taking on the full concept. The outcome, I can tell you now, is liberation and thriving.

## ORGANIZATIONAL PERFORMANCE

“Performance” is a commonly used term in the field of organizational consulting and management. In that context, performance often refers to the actual impact organizations have on the world, and it is generally compared to prior intentions set in advance. Organizational performance is also dependent on individual and team performance. Folks may get annual performance reviews to see how they’re measuring up against predetermined individual goals, and staff members who produce high quality work can be considered high performers. Team performance focuses on how well a team produces agreed-upon outputs, and high performing teams are of real value, as well. It is a basic given in the world of nonprofit organizational change and



management that the purpose for improving individual, group, and organizational behavior, systems, and culture is to influence organizational performance, the impact an organization has on the world.

The reliance on the term “performance” in the world of organizational change and management is indicative of something much larger at play, however. Organizational performance is, of course, an application of the broader concept of performance. Theater director and performance studies academic Richard Schechner divides human existence into four activities: being, doing, showing doing, and explaining showing doing. While he describes “being” as existence itself, “doing” is any and all activity, and “showing doing” is “pointing to, underlining, and displaying” doing. Performing occurs when there is either doing or showing doing. Explaining showing doing is, in Schechner’s case, writing about performance. For me, it is writing about Organizational Performance Art.

Most activities we engage in, other than the core ones required for our beingness, such as respiration, ingestion, elimination, and rest, involve performing. They involve doing and showing doing. We are always performing different versions of ourselves, depending on the setting we are in. We dress, hold our bodies, and talk differently with our colleagues and supervisors, compared to when we are with friends and family. We present ourselves differently to ourselves, with our lovers, with our friends, to our parents, and to our grandparents. The workplace is a stage on which we perform, just as is any other setting.

Here is what I think:

Thinking is performing

Writing is performing

Loving is performing

Mourning is performing

Remembering is performing

Pleasing is performing

Work is performing

Sometimes, participants of group processes I have facilitated question the value I hold of bringing one's full, authentic self to an organization or community. They reserve parts of themselves for their private lives and do not want to share of themselves fully in an organizational setting. In fact, I see no conflict here. Recognizing that we are performative everywhere we go and that our performance changes depending on the context we find ourselves in allows us to embrace the different selves we are and not feel bifurcated.

This reconceptualization of organizational performance is linked to many other topics related to performance that I touch on in this book, including social constructionist theory and shamanic journeying, and, of course, environmental theater and performance art. Invoking a broader understanding of the concept of performance allows for a wider range of principles, tools, and practices that can be accessed within an organizational context. It allows for wholeness, breath, and play.

### ORGANIZATIONAL ART

In our racialized capitalist society, where value is defined by the ability to make money, art is generally consumed for entertainment and not considered worthy of investment, except for the rare artist and their work which has been deemed to be of financial value. This means that the term "art" is often associated with what cannot produce financial value. This understanding of art financially marginalizes most visual, media, and performing artists, and at the same time it disenfranchises people working in other fields by not allowing their work to be considered art. Organizational consulting is generally not considered art, but it can and should be.

I define art as the application of creativity, innovation, and curiosity to any given function. The term "organizational art" centers an artistic approach to organizational change. While the term "art" has been taken up by many in my field, it is often used in a narrow, limited way. Calling something the "art of xxx" applies the imprimatur of

“art,” as it is traditionally understood, on whatever is being described. It doesn’t, however, put a stake in the ground and get clear on what exactly is meant by art.

## PERFORMANCE ART

This may be the most difficult pairing of terms. For many, it brings up associations of suffering through inscrutable, anything-goes performances, ones that are considered less rigorous or meaningful when compared to art on a wall, a play, choreography, or a musical score. Performance Art makes use of a wide range of art forms and activities, often using non-traditional art spaces. It is human bodies doing something over time and framing it as art. Performance art historian RoseLee Goldberg defines the term as “live art by artists” who take “life as its subject.”

While Performance Art is often associated with performance that has developed since the 1970s or so, it has its roots in early 20th century avant-garde visual art. Its ancestral lineage includes Happenings, live events created by visual artists in the 1950s and '60s. Allan Kaprow’s book on the subject traces the development of Happenings to visual artists’ work on Assemblages in the earlier part of the 20th century. With Assemblages, visual artists created cultural objects from found items. Eventually, they grew their work to human-scale Environments that allowed viewers to walk in, around, and through them. Happenings evolved from this tradition and added an overt performative element. Instead of (or in addition to) having physical objects be the center of viewers’ attention, people were utilized as artistic material. Viewers were encouraged to interact both with the physical environments as well as the people/performers inhabiting these environments. In fact, with Happenings, there are often no spectators. Everyone is a participant.

An organizational application of Performance Art is part of the Assemblage–Environments–Happenings continuum. Organizational applications of Performance Art use a few rules regarding human interaction to guide the behavior of a group. By providing simple directives

that yield unexpected outcomes, an organizational application of Performance Art invites and frames participants' interactions as consciously performative rather than unconsciously so. Consider the following instructions from different participatory conversational methodologies and structures that I utilize:

- Discuss with your table partners a given question for thirty minutes. In the next round, find new table partners to discuss a new question. (World Café)
- Stay with a discussion group only if you have something to contribute or learn. (Open Space)
- Sit in a circle. Talk only when holding the talking piece. (Circle Practice)

These directives live in a similar space as those that Kaprow gave in his 1959 work *18 Happenings in 6 Parts*, such as when a bell rings you may move to a different room. They have a common, eye-opening, sometimes giddy effect on their participants. People follow directives and interact with each other in novel ways.

I am choosing to widen the term Performance Art, just as I have widened the terms “performance” and “art,” separately, to inform organizational change work. Performance Art is art, broadly defined, that centers live human process. As I apply the term to organizational work, Performance Art invites in a specific stance that centers live, emergent human process as the artistic medium.

The effects of an organizational application of Performance Art can be liberatory and long-lasting. They can enliven communities and organizations beyond the confines of time and space allotted for an event. In fact, this is a major distinction between an organizational application of Performance Art and their artistic forebears. While an organizational application of Performance Art starts in a room, its effect on a community or organization may ripple on, without end.

## ORGANIZATIONAL PERFORMANCE ART

Organizational Performance Art is performance art; it utilizes carefully designed live, participatory processes that are out of time with the regular routines and processes of an organization and the public it serves. Organizational Performance Art is also organizational art; it is the witnessing and working with the internal functioning of a group, utilizing an artistic sensibility that is centered on creatively working with emergence. And Organizational Performance Art's *raison d'être* is to positively influence organizational performance, in the myriad of ways that performance can be conceptualized.

The term Organizational Performance Art centers a performative, or theatrical, frame to foster deeper connection and authenticity. I facilitate—direct—organizational participants—actors—in a meeting space—and time—that is artificial, different, and separate from the normal workday. And within that very artifice, I invite people to bring their full, authentic selves forward in a way that can be worked back into their regular day-to-day workspace and encounters. It is a theatrical employment of artifice in service to an authentic end, that of organizational transformation.

Transformation is not change for the sake of doing something different. Transformation is powerful, meaningful change in service to positive social thriving and liberation. Thriving is moving in the direction of actualization. It is flourishing. Liberation is a freeing from oppression by people who have historically taken or been granted power over others because of their social identities. These include (but are not limited to) race, gender, sexuality, age, ability, religion, nationality, family composition, and education.

Organizational Performance Art supports organizational thriving and liberation and inspires the following questions for my field and the world at large, questions taken up both directly and indirectly throughout this book:

- How can we—organizations and the people who support them—move from a place where an organization's internal members (e.g.,

staff, volunteers, board) are oriented toward performing for external stakeholders (e.g., service and product recipients, funders, politicians) to a place that is more collaborative, real, present, emergent, uncertain, and fluid?

- How can the work at retreats and special meetings that examine, practice, and set intentions for positively transforming organizational culture inform a new way to be back in the day-to-day functioning of an organization and life at large?
- How can Organizational Performance Artists use illusion (the artifice of a meeting or retreat) in the service of dis-illusion? (That is, how can we develop the connective tissue to bridge from artifice back to day-to-day functioning that has been transformed by the artifice?)
- Why is the norm to *perform* at work and thus not show up as our full selves? Why is there no invitation to yoke together passion and responsibility, to initiate, to live?
- Why are we so afraid of uncertainty and emergence?

At the heart of the work of an Organizational Performance Artist is the holding of space in service to communal thriving and liberation. Holding space involves an emptying out of oneself to be emotionally, spiritually, psychologically, and mentally present for and attuned with others. While I am aware, when I am holding space, of how my body feels, what my thoughts are, and what emotions I am experiencing, I am focused on using my presence as invitation for people to first feel and then share their own presence. It is part modeling, part emptying out, part invitation.

Organizational Performance Art holds space for joy and possibility. It holds space for sitting with uncertainty, playing with new ideas and practices, and co-creating emergently. Helping people to develop greater tolerance for sitting in the discomfort of not knowing what is next is one of its central practices. Riding a wild, unknown wave and not being

subsumed by it invites people to engage all of their senses, be receptive to what is going on for them internally, and stay open to exchange with the rest of the world. It softens the bounds between people and invites in possibility. It is a precondition for co-creation, and co-creation is a precondition for communal thriving and liberation.

I offer a few parameters that encourage people to fully manifest and bring their best selves forward. Performing, whether it is among actors in a theater or with colleagues in a social change organization, is about the art of being. Organizational Performance Art, holding-space art, allows this to happen. Two community members who participated in a series of meetings I facilitated described their experience. One said, “When you arrive and sit with us, our conversation, our presence, is electrified,” and the other added “We go deep, quickly, with a lot of trust, and we’re not necessarily all trusting people.”

Organizational Performance Art is holding space. Holding space is witnessing. Witnessing is performing. Performing is playing. Playing is dancing with joy and possibility. Dancing with joy and possibility is delighting. Delighting is co-creating the conditions for liberation and thriving. Co-creating the conditions for liberation and thriving is what it’s all about.

These concepts are deeply explored in this book.