Exploring Creativity

Under the guidance of Moeran and Christensen, the authors in this volume examine evaluative practices in the creative industries by exploring the processes surrounding the conception, design, manufacture, appraisal, and use of creative goods. They describe the editorial choices made by different participants in a 'creative world', as they go about conceiving, composing or designing, performing or making, selling and assessing a range of cultural products. Their study draws upon ethnographically rich case studies from companies as varied as Bang & Olufsen, Hugo Boss, and Lonely Planet, in order to reveal the broad range of factors guiding and inhibiting creative processes. Some of these constraints are material and technical; others are social or defined by aesthetic norms. The authors explore how these various constraints affect creative work, and how ultimately they contribute to the development of creativity.

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Exploring Creativity

Evaluative Practices in Innovation, Design, and the Arts

Edited by

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Foreword

HOWARD S. BECKER

Managers like to – well, manage. They like to know that if they do X, they will get Y result. And if all that can be expressed in hard numbers, so much the better. Not surprisingly, they find it harder to do than they would like. And no wonder. The inputs to the equations that might be thought to give the solutions to such problems are difficult to construct, and the actual numbers that would replace the Xs and Ys in them prove themselves difficult to come by. Nowhere is this more evident than in the problem of creativity and the corollary problem of innovation, where definition of the key terms and the discovery of viable metrics have long eluded all the interested parties.

This should not be surprising. Anyone who has actually watched the processes that we like to encapsulate in words like 'innovation' and 'creativity' knows that the people involved in doing these things and managing their being done have great difficulty settling on what the words mean and what indices might be used to measure their presence. The chapters in this volume report the results of close investigation of these slippery variables. The researchers went to organizations which consciously sought to create new and different results, to find innovative ways of producing heretofore unseen products which would appear to the ultimate users. They watched the people who spent their time producing these innovative results and then watched what happened when the rest of the organization had the opportunity to respond to what the innovators had innovated. They followed innovations through the entrails of the organizations in which they occurred and met their fate.

I won't try to summarize the results of this remarkable set of investigations here. The results – no surprise – varied considerably. The industries and organizations involved in creating these hubs of innovation varied in all sorts of ways – size, kind of product, forms of authority, and all the other things students of organizations know so well. Because serious investigation of such processes in depth takes a lot of time and many investigators to do properly, these studies could not

produce the numbers of cases standard forms of statistical analysis require. So the results presented here are, in the best sense, exploratory, designed to alert researchers and managers to some, at least, of the things that need to be taken into account when we try to understand how and when new ideas take shape and make their way through a complex business organization.

I take a few lessons from the case studies in this volume. The first is that the crucial thing to understand is that innovation and creativity are not *things* but rather *processes*. They don't happen all at once, as the result of the coming together of an appropriate mix of the right ingredients in the right proportions: so much careful selection of properly trained personnel, so much managerial input, so much in the way of resources of money and time, etc. Innovation is not a 'thing' that comes out of a machine fed the right ingredients. Instead, innovation is a shorthand term for a long story.

The story includes a lot of twists and turns and byways, all explored in the chapters that follow. The story line includes things such as 'new ideas,' 'managerial initiatives,' and 'assessments of marketability.' It is punctuated by events like 'managerial careers' and their stages and steps, 'invocations of company policy,' 'invocations of "the brand,"' 'meetings,' and 'reviews of results.' The story concludes with the outcome with which managerial science generally concerns itself: 'decisions.'

The chapters in this book focus, in large measure, on practices of evaluation. They ask who evaluated the proposed innovations at every step of their progress through an organization, and what the consequences of those evaluations were for the proposed product, for the organization, and for the careers of those involved.

The story-like character of innovation means, most crucially, that appropriate mixtures of inputs never guarantee desired outputs. Each step of a story has several possible next steps, each one leading to a somewhat different outcome, perhaps involving different people. As the number of steps multiplies, the number of possible outcomes multiplies as well. In the end, we can account for the outcome only by telling the story of how it came out that way: who took what steps and then what happened, which possibilities opened up as a result, and which disappeared from view. The chapters in this volume propose – implicitly for the most part, but the implication is there – that the equations for estimating the likelihood of innovation and creativity in organizations lie a long way down the road.

I take a second lesson from these chapters. It takes a lot of people to create 'innovation' and 'creativity.' I put the words in quotation marks because one of the key events in the process we're concerned with here occurs when someone in an organization who is empowered to make that sort of judgment decides that a particular product or idea is, after all, innovative and creative and therefore just what our organization needs or, conversely, that it is not after all either of those things and instead is something that, after all, doesn't 'fit with the image of our brand' or will 'disrupt the way our organization works' or any of the many other things that might lead to a negative evaluation.

The key term is 'someone in an organization who is empowered to make that sort of judgment.' If we make a list of all the people whose inputs to the process affect the result, people who fit that description have perhaps the most influence. They sit at the end of the production line, doing what we might call quality control, and make the final judgment that sends the idea on to full implementation or instead throws it into the bin of rejects. Who sits in that position may well be the CEO or some other highly placed person in the organization chart, but that isn't sure. Only close-up investigation of the organization as it goes about its daily work can reveal who actually makes such decisions. It's never sure who is the crucial decider until you can follow what happens as it happens.

The generalization of that observation says that every person in the organization (and others outside it) has a potential effect on what the organization does. We won't know how innovative and creative acts and results occur until we know what everyone involved (reckoned broadly, I'd better repeat) has done or not done to make things happen just as they finally did happen.

The more easily understood cases in this book describe situations of conflict, in which one party – a designer, perhaps, or the members of a 'creative team' – produces something 'innovative' and another party says 'No.' Saying 'No' doesn't always result from a judgment that the new idea is not a good one but because it runs afoul of something else already in place in the organization: a brand's image, someone's prerogatives which will be infringed on by the consequences of the new idea, perhaps the judgments (real or anticipated) of someone else farther down the line – customers, dealers, etc.

The more complicated stories involve complicated interactions among several categories of people, each group or perhaps each individual

pursuing their own interests and not worried that much about the interests of others.

If we combine the possibilities of stages in the story and the possibilities of the conflicting interests of the many groups and individuals who take part or are implicated in all these stories, logic tells us that the number of combinations is very large and the possibility of planning for the desired outcome will be correspondingly difficult, and may be in any practical sense not possible.

A final thought. All the cases in this book started out with the knowing and willing cooperation of the management of the organizations involved. What would they look like if they had been done in some different way that didn't require that cooperation? Would the investigators have seen other things? Would they have glimpsed a different approach to these phenomena which didn't take as given the problem that management presented them with? There's no way to know that until such approaches are tried.

Acknowledgments

This edited volume is the result of two intensive workshops organized by Brian Moeran and Bo T. Christensen in May and September 2011 under the title of *Creative Encounters: Evaluative practices in the creative industries*. These were two of a number of similar workshops taking place under the auspices of ©*reative Encounters*, an interdisciplinary research program focusing on the socio-economic organization of creative industries. It was funded by the Strategic Research Council of Denmark (2007–2011), and based at the Copenhagen Business School. We are very grateful to both organizations for enabling us to engage in such exciting research.

As organizers, we would like to thank Carsten Yssing, program administrator of ©*reative Encounters*, for the hard work he put into organizing the two workshops. We would also like to thank Associate Professor Keith Sawyer for serving as an excellent discussant at the first workshop, and Professor Howard S. Becker for mentoring and providing inspiration during the second workshop. And finally, of course, thanks to the authors, who accepted our invitation to carry out ethnographies in a string of creative industries, probably without realizing the scope of the journey and the mass of work involved.

The venture of writing this book mirrors many of the topics covered in it. We've negotiated multiple opinions of what the vision for the book was supposed to be, and battled with authors and publishers about the how and why. Was this to be a book situated in the genre of anthropology, business, psychology, of some interdisciplinary mix? Ideas have surfaced, and been killed along the way, where we as editors have also experienced that some of our pet ideas had to be slain. Chapters have been written, rewritten, retracted, failed to meet deadlines, and cut, before we finally arrived at this particular set of chapters. A mysterious syndicate at Cambridge University Press made the decision to support the project, and we wish to extend our gratitude to Paula Parish at Cambridge University Press for nursing this manuscript to book form.

At this point our editorial thumbs are pointing upwards, and now it's over to our readers, critics, and reviewers to make up their minds about whether all this exploring, evaluating, negotiating, and deciding was worthwhile. All we can do now is await their decisions, and contemplate who else we might wish to thank in the obligatory thank-you speeches.