

Regaining Momentum: Enhancing Self-Criticism and Perseverance through Arts-based Entrepreneurship Education

Sandberg B^{1*} and Reckhenrich J²

¹HTW Berlin Business School, University of Applied Sciences Berlin, Germany

²Jörg Reckhenrich Strategische Kreativität, Germany



Abstract

In the discourse on arts-based learning for business applications, entrepreneurship is a blind spot betwixt applications in organizational and human resources development. Artistic practice is acknowledged as a blueprint for communication and leadership skills, but its potential for self-management in entrepreneurial settings is widely ignored although artists and entrepreneurs resemble each other in some personality traits, and business creation is related to the artistic process. Entrepreneurship education is usually focused on specialist skills and methodical expertise while neglecting soft skills such as perseverance and reflectivity. Our essay addresses these three gaps by introducing arts-based learning to entrepreneurship education and highlighting artists' ability to cope with inevitable creative crises, to act out productive dissatisfaction, and to strive persistently for a result that is unknown to begin with. Our line of argumentation starts with illustrated investigation of the artistic practice that notions of productive dissatisfaction and perseverance were derived from. Based on individual practical knowledge and a review of artists' statements, we compiled a list of attitudes and artistic behaviour patterns that are suitable for escaping stagnation. Starting from shortcomings in entrepreneurship education, we point out the potential of adopting an artistic mindset and give an example of trainings in arts-based entrepreneurship education. A successful entrepreneur who admits the benefits of visual arts for starting a business tops off the reflections.

Keywords: Arts-based learning; Entrepreneurial learning; Entrepreneurship; Entrepreneurship education; Perseverance; Personality competence; Self-criticism

***Corresponding author:** : Sandberg B, HTW Berlin Business School, University of Applied Sciences Berlin, Germany

Reckhenrich J, Jörg Reckhenrich Strategische Kreativität, Germany

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Graphic Prologue

"It's true that I'm rarely happy, so that's why I keep working." (Alberto Giacometti) [1]

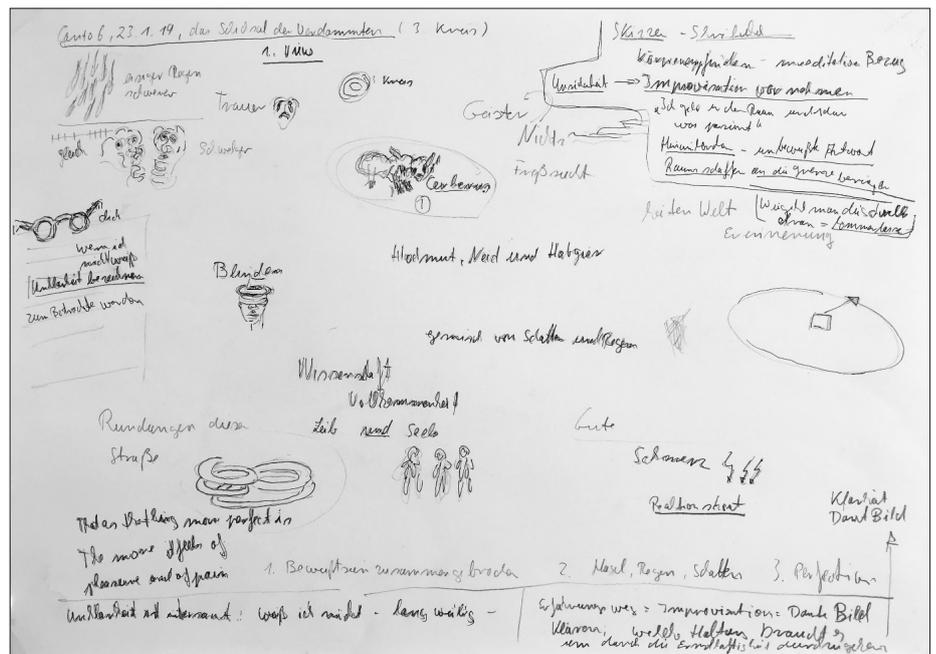


Figure 1: Sensing the burden of stagnation.

When we met in Jörg Reckhenrich’s studio half a year before we wrote this essay, we intended to update each other on our latest projects and to exchange thoughts. However, our conversation started with a look at a variety of charcoal drawings on the studio walls and a recap of their emergence. Jörg had been working on transforming Dante Alighieri’s Divine Comedy into a series of drawings. In the Divine Comedy, Dante finds himself lost in a dark wood he cannot evade. He is unable to find the “straight way”. The drawings on display related to the 6th canto in the first part of

the Divine Comedy, which is hell. This is quite close to what Jörg encountered while he was drawing. More than once he got stuck. He felt he was getting nowhere. Every now and then, Jörg was caught in a paralyzing state he would have loved to get out of as soon as possible. However, there was no easy way out. In each lean period, the first step for Jörg to escape was to accept the situation without giving in. He admitted all his unpleasant feelings of sadness and anger. Then he started drawing and included these feelings (Figure 1).

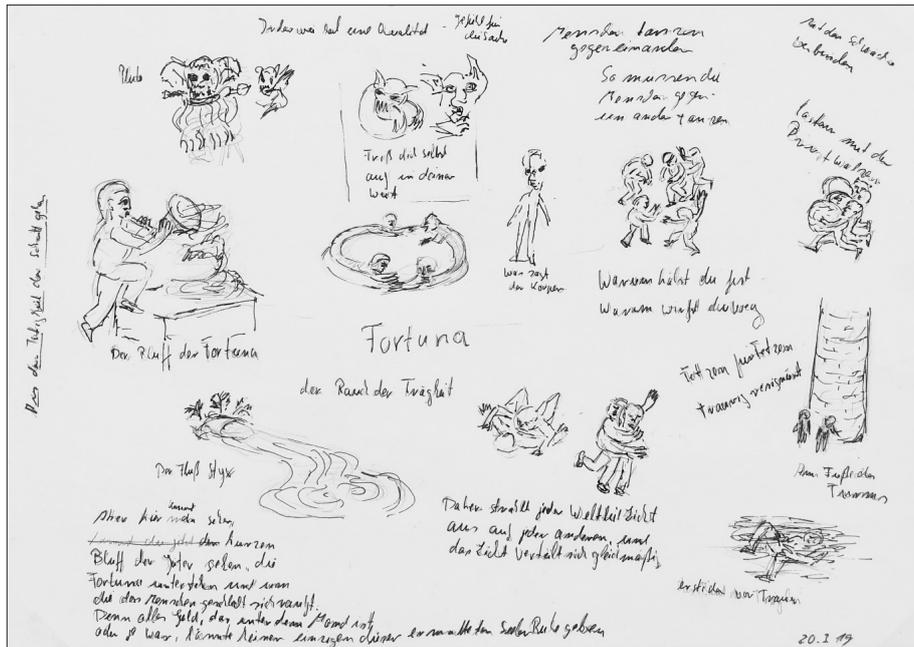


Figure 2: Doing anything.

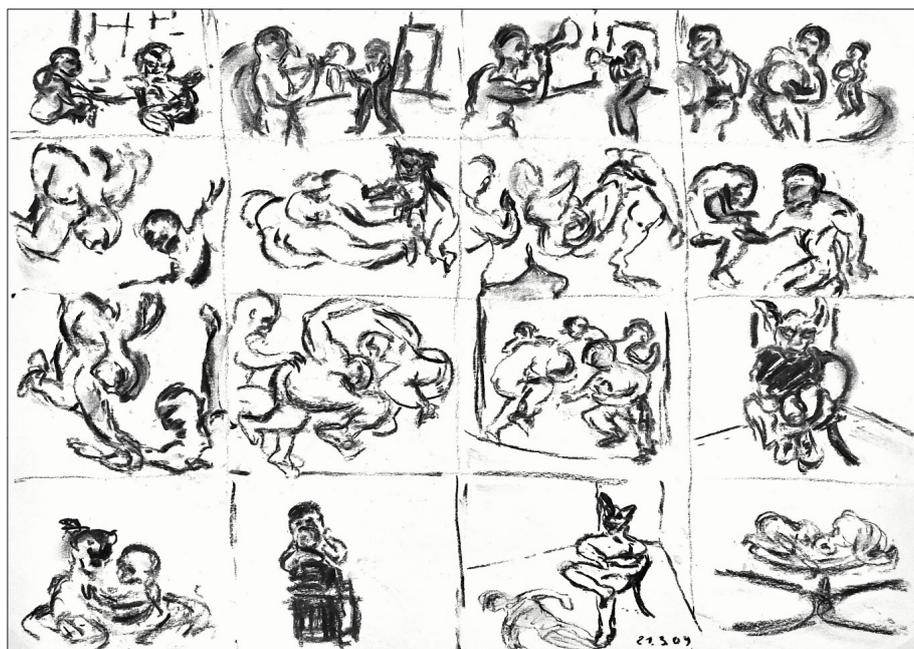


Figure 3: Replicating until exhaustion.

Jörg slipped into what he called “a state of limbo” in which he discovered options to push things forward. Sometimes he abandoned the issue he was working on and did something completely different, such as paperwork. Other times he started improvising on a drawing in order to find any promising aspect to continue with. In this manner, little scenes and expressions of Dante’s prose emerged (Figure 2). In a subsequent step, Jörg took some promising motifs and drew as many versions as he could (Figure 3). Once in a while, Jörg took an element like one particular figure and made it a nucleus of further exploration. For instance, he varied the figure by linking it to a different visual source, the head of a mythical stone creature he had once photographed in a Romanesque church (Figure 4). During his drawing process, self-

criticism was Jörg’s constant companion. Does the work stand up to scrutiny? He played with different versions, erased and drew over, but was not satisfied yet. Having visited an exhibition, Jörg applied another strategy: he played with the style of another artist, Francis Bacon (Figure 5). One day, an actor paid Jörg a visit. Looking at the drawings, he found that in one draft the space looked very much like a stage. He suggested, “Why not create a series of drawings in which the creature occupies the space?” Restarting from this, Jörg created a triptych of a figure entering, taking and leaving a stage (Figure 6). With constant reflection, trials and variations, Jörg merged all the ideas and ended up with a double portrait in his own style (Figure 7).



Figure 4: Drifting and exploring.



Figure 5: Imitating a role model.



Figure 6: Following external stimulation.



Figure 7: Striving for consistency.

Exploring Jörg's drawings and their formation, we wondered about artistic stamina and its relevance for different stages of the creative process. We agreed on a strong motivational aspect that we called "productive dissatisfaction". We assumed that there was some kind of artistic resilience related to the artistic process itself, and we found this perseverance hypothesis confirmed both in many artist's statements and in psychological research later on. Based on practical knowledge and an extensive but unsystematic review of artist biographies and interview material, we compiled

a list of attitudes and artistic behaviour patterns that are suitable for escaping stagnation. As arts-based learning as discussed in academic literature has almost completely ignored the creative interplay of self-criticism and persistence so far, we looked for promising fields of application. Regarding similarities between artists and entrepreneurs, we suggest an enhancement of entrepreneurship education, give an example for trainings in arts-based effectuation, and conclude with remarks of an entrepreneur trained in visual arts.

Productive Dissatisfaction in Artistic Labour

Artful creation stands for asking unusual questions, discovering opportunities and creating novelty. Coping with uncertainty and openness to both the process and its results are preconditions for any productive artistic labour. Artists pick up on an issue, do preliminary research and conduct a dialogue with the material without preconceived views on its outcome [2]. They choose a motif or an issue they love to explore, but they do not have a clearly defined objective in doing so [3]. The artistic process is led by subjective perception, imagination, and intuition. Artists are working with methods that differ from rational, systematic management procedures by candour and mindfulness [4,5]. They do not impose an idea on the process but find it by dealing with the material. An artwork is formed organically in a constant interplay of tentative action, perception and reflection. Creating a work of art means playful thinking in a medium such as paint on canvas [6]. Artful creation can be described more as a repertoire rather than a repeatable pattern, certainly not a methodology.

Like in any creative process, there are identifiable stages such as exploration, draft and execution [7]. However, the artistic process is undirected and unpredictable, meandering and erratic. Its stages overlap and interpenetrate in iterative phases. Artistic labour is about finding solutions in “non-linear explorative movements” [3] and on creative roundabout routes. It is about exploring unknown paths, radically changing direction if necessary, making detours, abandoning failure and starting anew. Artists are striving for consistency of the artwork in the ongoing progress. Until it is finished, they are lingering in a state of productive dissatisfaction. “Artistic activity seems to be defined ... by a series of ‘crises’ ..., a constant self-doubt and a desire to start everything afresh” [8,5]. Psychological research on factors that facilitate visual artists’ creativity shows that connecting selected elements and turning chaos into structure is their crucial cognitive ability. Regarding activity orientation, artists score high on sensation-seeking, openness to new experiences, and risk-taking. The decisive conative factor, however, is self-criticism [7].

The popular preconception of artists as geniuses who are able to trigger the Eureka moment at will does not reflect the reality of artistic labour. Dead ends, dry periods and recurring blocks usually remain hidden to the audience. However, the phenomenon of crisis seems almost inevitable in any artistic process. Most artists are faced with moments of stagnation. Being stuck, an artist is unable to visualize a notion or to develop any idea [8]. Inner critics may drown out intuition by almost destructive formalistic evaluation.

Artists are able to overcome these situations with outstanding perseverance [7] and eagerness. They are familiar with stagnation, and they know any crisis will be a temporary state, which will probably lead to a breakthrough. Therefore, artists do not give in, but trust in the process and keep on working. Ideally, they neither rely on patterns that worked before, nor take the easy route to overcome obstacles.

Escape Artistry in Case of Stagnation

In order to find something new, artists are prone to a repertoire of mindsets, attitudes, behaviour patterns and techniques that will lead them through phases of stagnation. It is a kind of repertoire based more on implicit knowledge rather than on technical skill. It is a pool of experience and not a toolbox that offers deterministic actions. The artistic repertoire triggers trial and error, a back and forth dynamic, with obstructing loops and knots. The repertoire provides options to choose from in the artistic process. Furthermore, it is part of the artistic identity as an individual signature, which is generally called “artistic style”. However, a broad repertoire does not lead to success automatically. In the worst case, artists will rely too much or even solely on tricks that worked before. Playing with the same repertoire again and again, they might trap themselves and produce schematical works of art after a while. Applying the repertoire is a steady tightrope walk between practice and exploration.

Just as there is no schedule in the artistic process, there is no standard tool in coping with crises. However, there is a set of universal strategies artists have at their disposal. All of them are based on the principle that you will reach out for something truly new if you go from rumination to action.

- A. Accept the state of stagnation.
- B. Sense the level and kind of stress.
- C. Identify where and how you sense the particular energy in your body.
- D. Leave the work for a while, work on another and return.
- E. Change the material. Go from painting to sculpture to drawing...
- F. Do anything. Use coincidence. Make an intentional mistake.
- G. Invite a friend. Present your work as well as your doubts.
- H. Repeat, repeat, repeat... Create as many versions of a detail as you can.
- I. Turn your painting or your drawing upside down.
- J. Imitate the style of a role model. (Even Picasso was a copyist.)
- K. Destroy it. Paint it over.

This repertoire should not at all be understood as a kind of order or step-by-step methodology. It complements the option of simply moving back to another stage in the process (e. g. from draft to research). Each coping strategy is an emergency plan and an imperative for an active rest. In this sense, the whole repertoire is a field of actions one can chose from. Often artists explore one or the other option randomly or by accident without knowing exactly what the right move is. Keeping up the problem and using the repertoire at the same time can create a momentum in which newness might emerge. Therefore, a “systematic crisis” is key for the artistic process and leads to an extension of the repertoire. However, there is no guarantee for success.

Introducing Productive Dissatisfaction to Arts-based Learning

As artists are accustomed to working in open, ambiguous situations and to dealing with surprises, they have become role models for managers, whose everyday working life is characterized by increasing dynamics, complexity and uncertainty. In an environment like this, openness, imagination, intuition, the ability to perceive and reflect, and the ability to recognize patterns in free-floating chaos gain in importance [9]. The linking of applied art and management is associated with the hope that creative intelligence can be communicated and translated into business correlations. Qualitative research on arts-based learning in business environments highlights its effects such as enhancing perceptiveness, creativity and capacity for teamwork. Interestingly, all cases with trainings aimed at managers or company personnel are based on performance art, whereas the visual arts only manifest in research on students as target groups [10-12]. Most trainings under scientific analysis are rooted in theatre practice. Participants improve self-perception and communication skills as well as their ability to perceive and to solve problems [13-15]. The same goes for an approach based on dance [16]. Another leadership training that used performance elements successfully addressed prosocial behaviour and leadership qualities [17]. Efforts in improving creativity highlight participants' problem-solving abilities and their capacity for innovation [15,18]. However, attitudes such as openness and playfulness, as well as the ability to move in uncertain areas, are not examined in detail. In the relevant research, observations on reflection and self-regulation [18] are almost non-existent and persistence is completely neglected. It seems as if the potential of arts-based training has not been fully exploited yet. At least, they have not been picked up by empirical research.

The key element of arts-based learning in non-artistic disciplines is simulating the artistic process. In doing so, instructors can convey artistic attitudes such as openness, fault tolerance, critical faculties, and perseverance. All of these are learnable constituents of a growth mindset, which drives motivation and achievement [19]. Superficially, arts-based learning for business is about creative techniques or sequences. Upon closer inspection, arts-based learning is about attitudes. The experience of crisis and the menace of failure illuminate an aspect of artistic labour that does not seem to be good for a management role model at all. However, learning from artists is not only about creativity or coping with uncertainty. It is about tolerating frustration and transforming productive dissatisfaction into a viable result. If arts-based learning is to convey a notion of the artistic process, it should encompass the experience of getting lost therein. Coping with dissatisfaction and stagnation does not mean perfecting results in each process phase (exploration, draft, execution), nor does it mean moving forcefully from stage to stage. Perseverance in the artistic process is about temporarily abandoning one's work instead of obsessively

searching for an escape or simply relying on a solution that worked before.

Conveying artistic perseverance exposes learners to situations they usually tend to avoid. It triggers disorientation and frustration. At the same time, it makes learners understand that uncertainty, personal stagnation, creative crises and blocks are dormant elements of genuinely innovative processes. Learners will experience that they are able to endure unpleasant phases of stagnation and "blindness". They will acquire strategies that enable them to manoeuvre into spaces of opportunity.

Linking Productive Dissatisfaction to Entrepreneurship Education

Business settings related to innovation usually require a strong creative drive and the ability to turn frustration into expectant action. A particularly interesting field to explore is entrepreneurship, because it takes visionary power, exploration and strength of implementation. Similar to artists, successful entrepreneurs neither think nor act in a linear-causal manner. The effectuation approach to business creation clarifies that entrepreneurs pursue their own interests while relying on their individual capabilities, namely competencies, contacts and available resources. They follow an intuitive decision logic, act step by step and remain flexible [20]. Newness does not result from a planned process but emerges in experimental relations and iterative learning loops [21]. Successful entrepreneurs are comparably venturesome and do not fear loss. They are able to follow unconventional, creative routes because they take a volatile environment, coincidences and unplanned events as opportunities [22,23]. Entrepreneurs do not choose from a set of given alternatives, but are able to create, to recognize and to make use of alternatives themselves. In this context, effectuation corresponds with the view that entrepreneurial opportunities are not given and waiting to be discovered but created (discovery theory vs. creation theory) [24].

Regarding innovativeness, uncertainty and ambiguity tolerance, artists and entrepreneurs are surprisingly similar. Like artists, entrepreneurs are passionate, proactive, self-efficient and persistent [25]. Self-criticism and perseverance are important entrepreneurial attitudes. Successful entrepreneurs share a strong conviction to overcome adverse circumstances, obstacles and setbacks [26]. The same goes for people known as called entrepreneurial managers, who "tend to consider learning as part of the opportunity identification and exploitation process. ... They tend to be persistent in testing the viability of business ideas and pursuing them despite of initial odds" [27, 88]. Therefore, these mutual characteristics are a promising learning area. There has been strong political support for entrepreneurial activities worldwide as they are considered to be a vital component of economic growth and development [28]. Entrepreneurship education and skills development are part of the pertinent UN policy framework.

Entrepreneurship education in formal and informal education systems is meant to enhance entrepreneurship awareness and strengthen entrepreneurial behaviors [29].

Managers are expected to show entrepreneurial spirit as well. They are supposed to be opportunity-oriented, strongly searching for a newness, gain a holistic view on reality and make confident decisions even if the situation is ambiguous. Therefore, entrepreneurship education is not limited to supporting business creation, but encompasses intra-corporate and society-related activities as well (intrapreneurship, social entrepreneurship) [25]. Instead of following linear models of business planning, entrepreneurship education builds on the effectuation approach. In order to establish a general entrepreneurial competence, trainings shall enhance specialist knowledge and methodical expertise as well as develop personality competence. Accordingly, the Entrepreneurship Competence Framework issued by the European Commission specifies, *inter alia*, creativity, perception skills relating to ideas, and tolerance of ambiguity [30]. Nevertheless, entrepreneurship education focuses on cognitive aspects. Expertise and method knowledge are centre stage, whereas non-cognitive competencies are neglected [25]. However, several studies show that creativity trainings foster entrepreneurship as they affect the ability to perceive entrepreneurial opportunities [31,32]. Presumably, appropriate trainings based on creation theory could go beyond this and improve the ability to develop entrepreneurial opportunities.

Connecting arts-based learning to entrepreneurship education is an innovative approach that draws its legitimation from both the relevance and the current design of entrepreneurship education. Arts-based methods could be a worthwhile complement in establishing and strengthening entrepreneurial attitudes among students, managers with a creative mission (in emerging markets and other new ventures) and prospective founders. Strengthening the ability to reflect ideas and actions, and to follow a possibly nebulous and rough but promising route instead of insidious surrender would be a valuable complement to common training approaches.

A Lesson in Arts-based Effectuation

The intention of art-based training is not to turn businesspeople into artists. The aim is to acknowledge principles and strategies of art and the artistic process, and to transfer them as a personal repertoire to a business context. An arts-based training, in which artistic escape strategies are embedded, is supposed to foster reflection and perseverance in businesspeople who are shaping the context in which they operate with entrepreneurial spirit. Therefore, participants are put into an intentional deadlock. Soon thereafter, they are made familiar with the artistic repertoire presented above in order to trigger a breakthrough, get back into

the flow and to find a twist in the way they work. The following episode gives an example of this approach.

At the start of a fifteen-day effectuation programme, 15 participants were invited to Jörg Reckhenrich's studio for half a day. The participants came from various organizational contexts, such as start-ups, non-profit organizations and large business units. The layout of the programme put an arts-based experience at the beginning, which was followed by an academic introduction to entrepreneurship theory and practice. The intention of this programmatic approach was to push the participants into an open situation and to observe whether key effectuation mechanisms would show. The organizers assumed that the arts-based beginning would have the participants figure out how to manoeuvre in a non-linear process, how to use available resources (material, technique, experience, etc.) and how to partner with the other actors in the project in order to tap the full potential of the group. In the studio, the participants first listened to the artist's stories. They learned how famous artworks emerged from an arduous process with lean periods on the verge of failure. These background stories carved out productive dissatisfaction as a key driver to reach out for quality and emphasized the development of persistence by being self-critical. With this introduction, one core principle of the artistic process as described above was brought into the room and set the tune for the following work.

The studio space had been prepared with essential materials (Figure 8) and made ready to host the group for a creative process. The intention was to create a typical studio atmosphere, ready for play and experiments. A short introduction was given to the setting, the material, the time frame and the task: Create a large wall installation with a simple paper folding technique! Work as a group and get finished within three hours! Deliberately, the task was formulated very generally. Other than the basic technique of folding paper and fixing it on the wall, no examples were given of how to solve the creative challenge. Both body language and first comments revealed that the task exerted pressure. Only gradually, the group accepted the situation and started coping with the open setting. Slowly the participants began to work. They started to test both material and technique. In this first phase, individuals and some small groups were working uncoordinatedly in silence. Essentially, everybody was working for himself. There was no connection or exchange of ideas and only few coordination. The participants evinced a "just do it" attitude with no plan where to go nor any quality criteria. In an artistic process, this phase would be called a "playful drift", with doing anything and making coincidence one's "partner". This can turn out as a fruitful beginning as long as self-criticism is part of the play. Jörg was observing the drift *modus*. He saw that the process did not lead to any artistic development, because the critical mode was missing. There was even the risk that the group would simply finish the work after half an hour (Figure 9).



Figure 8: Starting point.



Figure 9: Intermediate result.

Therefore, Jörg opened a second phase. He carried out his first intervention as if a friend had come to the studio, looked at the work with a fresh eye and described what he saw. Jörg's intention was to make participants discover specific ideas and to recognize patterns. They should evaluate and arrange the next steps without setting a too narrow goal. What is beyond? What are the options?

Which variations are possible? These were some of the aspects discussed. In this situation, Jörg emphasized how important it was to work with the group's own approach instead of relying on his impulses. After this intervention, the group coordinated on two or three main themes. Some ideas that were already on the wall were destroyed. For instance, the word LOVE was put down as it became

obvious that it did not fit into the emerging consistency. Other participants repeated patterns again and again to test whether this would create a stronger structure. In the next step, phase three, the participants started a group discussion without Jörg's support. The joint discussion turned into a group exploration by literally turning ideas upside down. For the first time, design ideas and controversies were negotiated. Parts of the composition were removed and altered to develop a complete work that followed a design goal, which was-most interestingly-still very open. The ambivalent energy made some of the participants leave the work behind and retreat. Small groups observed and discussed others worked on their own composition. Before Jörg's second intervention, the energy had reached its lowest point. "Give up or continue?", was the question. Finding the right moment to finish is exactly the challenge of every artistic process. The participants saw that a goal was recognizable, but not yet achieved. Individual exploration by single participants who pushed to overcome the stagnation opened

up new perspectives. Furthermore, they redefined existing patterns and combined them with others. In doing so, they opened the others' eyes for the emerging coherence of the piece.

In the last step, the participants tried to finalize the work. They discussed intensively where to add, where to take away and where to combine parts which were still not integrated. Having come that far, everybody was keen to succeed. The group sensed that their eyes were sharpened for going the extra mile and took the challenge. They explored joint creativity and finally came to a result (Figure 10). Still, this result was critically reviewed as the participants now had developed a reliable sense for quality criteria. In the end, the energy had returned to the room and the students could acknowledge their effort and the dynamic of the process. One of them said: "When we look at the finalized wall-mounted installation, we can see a wild mixture of exhaustion, pride and amazing self-critical serenity. This was preceded by an exciting, sometimes exhausting creative process".



Figure 10: Solution.

Entrepreneurial Epilogue

"What matters most is determination. You're going to hit a lot of obstacles. You can't be the sort of person who gets demoralized easily", says Paul Graham [33, para 1] about the most important quality in start-up founders. To Graham, who is regarded as a start-up guru, founders need to be flexible, imaginative and unconventional [33]. Running a start-up is at times demoralizing. Feeling that a promising idea does not take off, founders go through what Graham calls a "trough of sorrow" [34] between market launch and modification. However, often things take a turn for the better if founders hold out and adjust their concept.

The trick is not to come up with ideas, but to notice them in the environment by asking questions and working on interesting things without any particular founding ambition or reward in mind

[35]. "You have to be prepared to see the better idea when it arrives" [36, para 20]. Founders should be able to change their original plan if it does not work out but build up on immature ideas instead of starting from scratch [36]. "The way to create something beautiful is often to make subtle tweaks to something that already exists, or to combine existing ideas in a slightly new way" [37,20].

Paul Graham is a successful entrepreneur and venture capitalist who is known as co-founder of YCombinator (YC), a Silicon Valley-based accelerator and seed capital firm. Graham has a background in software engineering and holds a Ph.D. in computer science. Not to forget that he studied painting at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Florence. "I've found that the best sources of ideas are not the other fields that have the word 'computer' in their names, but the other fields inhabited by makers. Painting has been a much richer source of ideas than the theory of computation" [37,21].

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