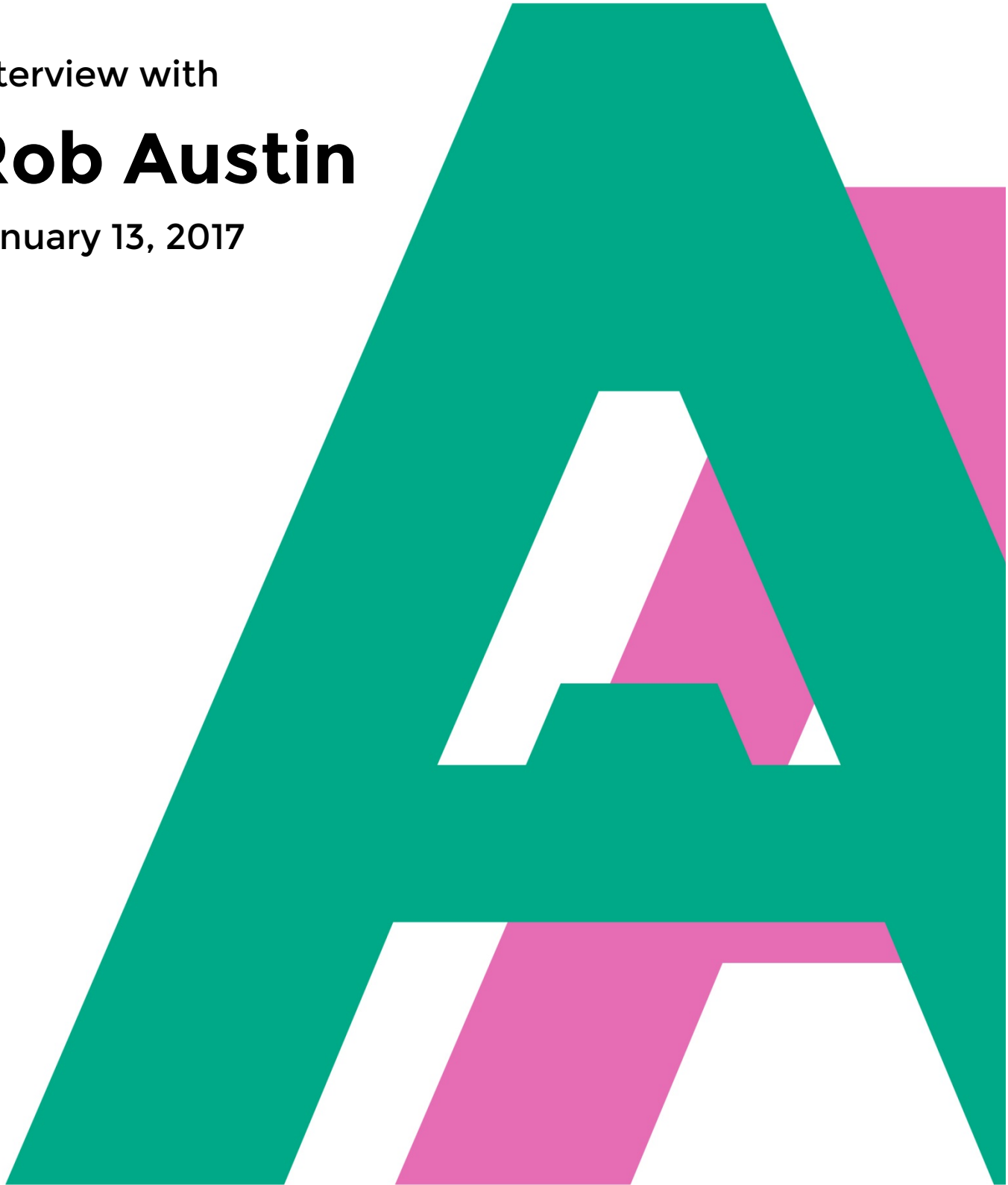


Age of Artists

Interview with

Rob Austin

January 13, 2017



The interview was conducted by Dirk Dobiéy on January 13th, 2017 via Videoconference.

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Introduction

Robert D. Austin is an innovation and technology management researcher and professor of Management of Innovation and Digital Transformation at Copenhagen Business School in Denmark. He is best known for pedagogical innovations in the teaching of technology management, and together with dramaturg and emeritus professor of theatre Lee Devin, for his "artful making" research, which examines business innovation through the lens of art practice. Their two books *Artful Making* and *The Soul of Design* explore the striking structural similarities between theatre artistry and production and today's business projects--and show how collaborative artists have mastered the art of delivering innovation "on cue," on immovable deadlines and budgets. *Artful Making* was also the starting point of our conversation with Rob Austin.

Interview

AoA: You wrote in your book *Artful Making* more than a decade ago that managers who understand how artists work, have an advantage to those who don't. Do you still think this is the case today?

Rob Austin: We have published a second book, *The Soul of Design*, which is kind of the next step from our first book. Therefore, I still think it is the case. The reason why it is true is that artists are engaged in activities, and have been perhaps forever, that are increasingly relevant to business. The sum of elements of creative work is becoming a more important competitive advantage in the business space. I often tell companies or students that this is particularly the case in developed economies because communication and transportation networks have become so usable and inexpensive that it devalues cost-leadership approaches to business. Many companies in many places can enter into price competition when goods move around the globe so cheaply. And there are many places you can produce for a lower cost than in developed economies because of structural advantages (e.g., lower wages in developing economies). So, if you are based in developed economies you have a structural cost disadvantage. It doesn't really matter how good you are, you may still have trouble defeating the competition based on cost. That forces more and more companies to differentiate themselves. Business differentiation usually arises from some sort of a creative act. It involves a shake-up for you that frees you from historical

patterns, habits, processes and procedures and comes up with something truly new. That is something artists are striving for and good at.

AoA: In your book, you described four qualities for artful making: release, collaboration, ensemble and play. Is this the way you describe how artists work? When you say managers who understand how artists work will have an advantage, is the knowledge of these four elements the advantage?

Rob Austin: I am sure all creative processes are not exactly alike but those four are main elements; this is actually a process description. A big part of what we are working on is to point out certain processes that artists use. These processes are recognizably similar across different people or organizations that are engaged in art practices. We also point out that they are kind of similar to what we see in a lot of business areas when we see an emerging need for a very high level of adaptability—the example we used in the book was software development. I wouldn't claim that people use that terminology. I don't think that is the case but many of the things that are expressed in these four processes are things that are not built into the reflexes of business managers who have learned to manage in a more industrial setting, where they are oriented to terms like maximizing, exploiting and value creation. James March published an article in 1992 in which he explained that businesses need to know both, how to explore and exploit. Companies should be able to explore and find new sources of value creation and need to be able to exploit existing ways of creating value. He also points out exploitation doesn't have to have the negative connotation that it typically has. Companies know

what they can do best and when they get larger it is a lot easier and more comfortable for them to focus on exploitation. I would say that what we are describing in our book is very much the exploration inclination. There are a lot of things in that process you would never do in a more industrial exploitation process like the whole idea of release, is not consistent with what you would try to do in a factory. There is also literature in the management research on what's called organizational ambidexterity. Organizations are trying to do both exploration and exploitation and are succeeding to differing degrees and we are trying to discover those companies.

AoA: We have looked at the process across the art genres and found four elements that shape an artistic attitude: curiosity, passion, confidence, resilience; and the artistic practice is comprised of: perception, reflection, creation, performance. What are your thoughts in contrast or combination to those terms?

Rob Austin: Richard Boland and Fred Collopy wrote a Book in 2004 called *Managing as Designing*. They talked about something that they called design attitude and contrasted it with decision attitude, they draw certain comparisons. It would line up with something I was talking before about decision attitude. The decision attitude is based on logical frameworks where you focus on the machinery to choose between alternatives. The creation of entirely new attitudes like the design attitude would be much more focused on a creative act. In a lot of creative processes, you don't choose between alternatives but create the right alternative. At that point, the choice is obvious. In the final situation of a creative act you have worked your way to an alternative through

what is basically an emergent process. Many businesses are historically rooted in the decision attitude. They need to move the direction to a design attitude. We all use slightly different terminology, but I have the feeling that we are talking about the same kinds of things.

AoA: What we can observe, in the world, is that on the one hand there are drastic changes and on the other hand people are striving for a balance, so maybe this [bringing artistic practice and ideas into business] is part of the solution. How could this be put together to become a global movement, since it seems it's highly fragmented at this point?

Rob Austin: We all come together but really slowly. We have more than 150 years of industrial thinking to overcome. The problem is always, when you are proposing new things and thinking in new categories and naming categories with different terminology, that terminology in that world lives at a disadvantage to the much more established terminology that's all been settled. Anything truly new is at first unfamiliar and therefore kind of uncomfortable and therefore without respectability and meaning for a while.

We see that in the world of art repeatedly when people create new challenging art forms there is often a considerable push back from the established art community. I think of examples like "The Rite of Spring" when it was first performed in Paris it provoked basically a riot. But there are a lot of other examples. Some people said Andy Warhol was not doing art.

I think this is not only an art-based phenomenon; it is a human thing. People like to use the categories they already have in their

minds. They don't enjoy not being able to make sense of things. They like to think they have already a good grip on the world. One of the things that's fundamentally difficult about the arts is that they are continually evolving the meaning of things. In certain kinds of activities, especially if you are a manager who has focused on an industry for a long time, you don't want to see much evolving at all. You want to see everything under control. When something as major as meaning starts to evolve; that doesn't look like a good thing. It looks like something that needs to get under control, it runs against your reflexes. I have a course this afternoon and I will teach identifying the differences between how you would manage a factory and how you would manage a design studio. Some of the reflexes we have in the factory are quite destructive in the design studio. If you follow the direction of what we were doing in Artful Making, this course uses a lot of that material and represents the continuation of that work.

AoA: How do you lead for artful making? What leadership behavior would you expect of an artful leader?

Rob Austin: An artful leader would probably be much more attuned to the emergent nature of creative acts and the way creative activities need to feed on each other: reactions to reactions to reactions as a way of moving ideas. They would be much more open to differences of perspectives because creative acts see things in different ways and are able to create something truly original.

A second part is that once you've created something original and valuable, to recognize that that's what you've done. That is

something businesses have a lot of trouble with. Sometimes they create something new and quite valuable but their habitual procedures, practices and mindsets keep them from seeing the value. It is a very common pattern in business that companies that invent things are not the ones which eventually make that into a business. They are too busy in a different kind of businesses; it's a pattern that repeats again and again. The case of a pharmaceutical company that saw itself as being in one kind of a business and they stumbled across a related drug, in a related category, but eventually the drug in the related category made its way to the market but not without a lot of delays because things that were in the core category keep getting put in the front of it in the queue. Much to the frustration of the people who were involved with this alternative product. The alternative product make it to the market and was a blockbuster but a lot of people think that it could have been a blockbuster many years earlier, if people were more open to different perspectives.

Another thing is that an open realization that variation is at the heart of innovation and creativity, whereas it is the thing to be discouraged in a more industrial process. Randomness is a bad thing if you're in an exploitation mode, but it's an absolute requirement if you're in an exploration mode. Companies have all sorts of systems that try to minimize variation in their processes, all of which work against creative and artful processes. Often in a creative activity you are making judgments about esthetic quality of a thing versus their practicality. In a design firm a limitation might be a certain budget of a number of hours for a certain activity. If we go beyond this number of hours we start to lose money, it would be an unprofitable job, if we go too far

beyond the budget. That is one set of pressures. Another set of pressures might be, we're at the budgeted amount that we expected to spend on this but we don't have a solution that we think is satisfactory, of a sufficient esthetic quality. A designer's inclination is to work beyond that boundary. A business manager's inclination is to say, "no, we have to restrict the budget because the job needs to be profitable." One thing we see in creative companies is that the managers are sometimes willing to go beyond those boundaries because they see it as an investment in future reputation, in creation of creative capabilities that they will get to reuse, and even creation of ideas that would come back in other products or work with other clients.

I guess it boils down to an inclination to set aside the classic cost minimization or profit maximization reflexes, for a lot of reasons: to create new capabilities, to keep the creative people happy because they don't want to do only profitable jobs, they want to do interesting jobs. One of the things we see in a lot of creative companies is that they will engage in projects that they know are not very lucrative or profitable, even going in, but these projects might be very interesting or stretch the creative capabilities in an interesting way. These companies talk about it in very practical terms: "we do this one and it's going to be fun but the next job we take has to be one where we pay the bills." There is that balancing act that a lot of creative companies engage in. I see another thing which is part of the paper we just written. The company we were studying there, having the right number of crisis in a year. When they have too many crises it is too disruptive, if they have too few crises then they are not poking their process enough.

AoA: What business sector or industry is that company from?

Rob Austin: It is a design firm. They don't like to have too many crisis in the year but they also don't like to have too few either. That's really not much like someone running a factory would think. The optimal number of crisis in a factory is zero. Those are just a few things and there are probably a lot of them, tolerance for ambiguity, and a capacity in a leader to help the people who work for them to tolerate ambiguity, in an important characteristic. To tolerate the fact that in a creative act you necessarily don't know where you are going and that can be uncomfortable.

AoA: How do you see the contrast between having an objective, or an ambition, or an idea about things, but then again letting emergence in?

Rob Austin: Often when you are in a creative process you start out going from A to B but you end up at C and that's just the nature of things. I do agree that often creative processes especially in practical settings start with an objective but there are always multiple ways of finding the objective. What distinguishes the creative processes is that the outcome of those processes sometimes doesn't solve the problem that they set out to solve. They reframe it in a new way that is more solvable or more satisfactorily solvable. Part of the creative act, especially in the field of design, is not to take the problem or objective as a given but to see as something that is subject to reframing and redefinition. A classic, elegant design solution is something that

reframes the problem, solves the reframed problem, and in the process which also solves the original problem. You start out thinking the problem and objective were defined in a certain way and often this is where in the field of design a lot of user research comes in.

I have got a doctoral student who is the CEO of the Danish Design Centre, his name is Christian Bason. He just finished his doctoral thesis and it will become a book about the use of design in a public sector, like in government. He talks about what characterizes a design approach as opposed to a decision or analytical approach. We don't see government agencies as involved in choosing from a menu of solutions to already defined problems, instead we send people out into the field to explore the deeper nature of the problem. We end up usually redefining the problem on the way to arriving at a solution or program that addresses the deeper problem. His doctoral thesis has a lot empirical data and he shows quite clearly that the people who engage in this process are at first extremely uncomfortable but in the end, they feel they have discovered a new approach to public service.

One of his examples is a social services agency in Australia. One of the workers said, "if you know how we would handle a situation like that in the past, we probably would have removed that child from the home. In the new approach, we went out into the situation and came to understand it better and found a better approach that were not the kinds of approaches were taken from our menu of options. We were able bring about a better outcome to solve the broader objective." Part of what goes on there is that the problem definition itself is a creative act, in a situation like

that. They don't just accept a problem that is given and already present, and in cast in stone in the world. They are remaking the problem in a form that lends itself to new solutions.

AoA: That is something we have also found, that asking the right questions is evident in artistic processes. In traditional business settings people already know the question and the answer, so they start much too late in the process in contrast to what art does. What's your view on purpose, on a spiritual level versus rational, objective, or target level?

Rob Austin: Especially the arts, but every creative activity, are in a kind of enriching your view or in other terms, they are good for your soul. They have a spiritual dimension but I think in my work I have veered away from pressing that too far. Partly I worry a little bit that it is a slippery slope. I think there is a certain line of logic you can encounter that kind of expects art to save the world. That's a lot to ask. We have to be kind of careful with what we approach. I emphasize that, and don't mean to say that it is not a real effect, but I do think it can be of overly dramatized and romanticized. I know academics that are guilty of that. They do research in what I would call arts in management. Deep down what they have at heart is a rather more romantic notion of the arts than I think most real artists have. I think artists approach their work from the standpoint that it is nourishing for them and for their soul but it is for them quite a practical matter. My co-author was a playwright for a while and did many things in the theater. One of the things he likes to say is that writing, for him, was about putting his head into the work and keeping it down for a certain number of

hours. Then do it again the next day. He was always quite skeptical on others who overly romanticized things.

There are some concepts that come up into the discussion that can be dramatically romanticized. There is also a sense where some artists, in order to cultivate image and aura, cultivate a romantic notion of what they do for external consumption, but I think it has relatively little to do with what they actually do. Most of the artists I interviewed over the years working on this kind of thing, don't try to romanticize what they do. In fact, it doesn't mean that their project is unimportant or mundane but for them, they like to make things. Again, I agree with you that art has this spiritual dimension, but I think it's dangerous for a couple of reasons because it over romanticizes what even artists think about art, often. And the second and perhaps biggest worry is that it asks too much of art. Art is a very powerful and positive force in the world but attributing supernatural powers to it is not fair. An artist lives in the world like everyone else.

AoA: Thank you very much for your time.