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## How Is The Artist Role Affected When Artists Are Participating In Projects In Work Life?



A moment of one TILLT - AIRIS workshop, where Swedish artist Malin Bellman participated in the development process of Sweden's future transport infrastructure. Image courtesy of TILLT

### Overview

**Henrik Stenberg**, PhD candidate at the Academy of Health and Welfare at the **University of Halmstad** (Sweden), is the author of an academic article which investigates how **visual artists' role as artists** are affected by their engagement in **artistic and social projects at workplaces**. His research derives from the action of two Swedish organizations – SKISS (Contemporary Artist in Contemporary Society) and TILLT - AIRIS (Artist in Residence) – which have been designing projects for artists and coworkers over the last decade.

## Research topics and results

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The focus in the article is on the social interaction between artists and employees in the framework of artistic and social projects at workplaces in Sweden. The study is a qualitative narrative interview study with participating fine artists. The categories in the interviews were how the artists worked with the projects, how the social interaction between artists and coworkers worked out, and how the artists evaluated the projects in relation to their ambitions. The results show that, many times, artistic projects promote well-being in organisations and to some extent benefit the artist, but that the ability of the artists to actually function as artists can be problematic.

## Motivation for research

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During the last decade in Sweden, as well as internationally, visual artists have come to function as a creative injection in organizations that offer artists services in Sweden: Skiss (Contemporary Artist in the Contemporary Society) and Airis (Artist in Residence). More than 70 cultural workers have participated in projects in Airis since 2002 and more than 50 fine artists have participated in projects in Skiss since 2005. The aim of this study was to describe visual artists' experiences of their role as artists and how this role is affected when they are engaged in artistic and social projects at workplaces in Sweden.

## Contribution to the field

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Artists in residence at workplaces are perceived as a resource for the community and not merely as an internal artistic affair. However, it can sometimes be problematic to operate as an artist in workplaces and simultaneously perpetuate artistic integrity. It can be asked whether artists should be performing this kind of work. If so, in order to improve the positive outcomes of the projects, it is important to prepare coworkers and the organisation for collaboration with the artist, which has not always been the case, and to ensure that the artist can actually work in an artistic way that is appropriate for him and her.

## Key learnings

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The artists gained different experiences concerning what they achieved in their projects. Several artists felt that the staff enthusiastically participated in the activities, which the artists initiated, and thought they were funny and creative elements at work. The artists believed that meaningful things happened in the workplace, in which employees perceived and reflected on their work situation and work relations in new ways. Various answers were given about what the artists thought came out of their participation in the projects for their own sake as artists. Artists have generally positive experiences of the projects. However, some of them noticed how the management is not primarily interested in the art but in the artist's creativity and way of working. One artist remarked that "the work creativity has become some sort of buzzword. It is not the art they want but the creativity, the way we work, and it is supposed to be valuable for staff in the workplace. But who cares about art?"

One additional outcome concerns emotional work. To be engaged in outreach artistic projects of this kind involves emotional work in relation with those concerned. It can be stimulating and constructive

kind involves *emotional work* in relation with those concerned. It can be stimulating and constructive emotional work, and the artists sometimes wants to work with emotional and social issues. But is can also be an emotional work that drains the artist of energy and creativity. Some of the artists felt a conflict trying to work with artistic means and organising projects and supporting different needs among the employees. When this kind of conflict is prolonged, there is a risk of emotional dissonance. Some artists find it hard to cope with emotional work they had to perform during the projects. The artist thus needs to establish throughout the project a *potential space* to be creative, which can be constructed in seclusion as well as in interaction with others, depending on the artists' needs.

**Henrik Stenberg** is a PhD candidate at the Academy of Health and Welfare at the University of Halmstad (Sweden). The article *How Is The Artist Role Affected When Artists Are Participating In Projects In Work Life?* was originally published in the International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Health and Well-being.

You can read the essay in full [here](#).