

Flow beyond Systems: Development through Somatic Intelligence

Editors: Maria Spindler and Tonnie van der Zouwen

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Michel van Dartel

Unravelling Human Situatedness Through Art

Abstract

An investigation of the relationship between societal development and the human body, as this special issue on ‘flow beyond systems’ sets out to do, should acknowledge that humans are *situated* beings. This is to say that, as a consequence of their embodiment, people are inseparable from the world around them. Human phenomena, therefore, cannot be fully explained without taking the dynamic interaction between human bodies and their environments into account. In terms of societal development, this means that the dynamic interaction between people and their environments plays a causal role in such developments. Such is a causality that can be attributed neither to a social structure nor to the individuals that act within it. Rather than aiming for specific conclusions regarding the behaviour of individuals or the structure in which they are organised, a situated view on the question of societal development shifts focus to understanding the dynamic interaction between individuals and their surroundings and how this interaction is determined and shaped by complex factors such as language, culture and knowledge (Elder-Vas, 2010). In other words, we need to unravel human situatedness to understand how societal change works and, ultimately, to advance society. In this article, I will propose art as a strategy to do so. As I will explain in what follows, however, art can only be productive in its contribution to understanding human situatedness under two conditions: 1.) that artists make effective use of their own situatedness and 2.) that their audiences are also regarded as situated beings.

1 Situatedness as Subject of Art

The notion of *situatedness* is arguably best developed within the study of the mind, where it is defined as the “theoretical position that posits that the

mind is ontologically and functionally intertwined within environmental, social, and cultural factors” (Costello, 2014, p. 1757). In other words, a situated view on questions regarding what the human mind *is* and *how it works* would consider the dynamic interaction between mind and environmental, social, or cultural factors to be part of the answer. Let me illustrate the kind of insights that such situated views may bring on the basis of a concrete example from the study of animal cognition. Ants have often been attributed high-level cognitive capacities by biologists that observed their impressive navigational skills in nature, such as the ability to plan routes and to form mental maps of their surroundings. Situated approaches to explaining these skills in ants, however, brought radically different explanations for their complex navigational behaviour: If one takes the interaction that ants have with their surroundings into account, then a small set of behavioural rules on how to interact with the chemical trails that ants produce suffices to perfectly model their navigation skills (see, e.g., Arkin, 1998). In other words, the mere inclusion of the insect-environment interaction into the explanation for their skills brought to light that ants’ navigational skills do not require high-level cognitive capacities at all, just a mere set of apt hardwired direct responses to their environment.

In various other disciplines, the notion is often used slightly more loosely and emphasises the causality of the relationship between humans and their physical, social, and cultural environments (Smith, 1999), which is to say that the dynamic interaction between human and surrounding factors may explain the phenomenon under study rather than either one of them alone. In investigations that use a “situated approach” within those disciplines, these relationships are taken as important starting assumptions. Such approaches, which consider humans in relation to their surroundings rather than in isolation from the world around them, have had significant consequences for theoretical and practical insights into a wide variety of human phenomena, ranging from how cognition works (Clancey, 1997; van Dartel, 2005; 2016b) to how identities are formed (Gonzalez-Arnal, Jagger and Lennon, 2012). In many disciplines where attention has shifted towards more attention for the

dynamic interaction between humans and their surroundings, this shift is referred to as a “situated turn”.

A Situated Turn in Art

Although art has had a working tradition that emphasised the importance of the dynamic relationship between humans and their surroundings, a situated turn in this field seems imminent (van Dartel, 2016b; 2017). Besides taking the dynamic relationship between humans and their surroundings into account in order to bring about certain methods (Simonsen et al., 2014), aesthetic effects (Bourriaud, 2002), or participation (Bishop, 2006), situated art also takes that relationship up as a *subject* for inquiry through artistic research (van Dartel, 2016b; 2017). Just as situatedness brought new insights into the situated nature of cognition while coincidentally providing new methods for studying it (Clancey, 1997; Clark, 1997), I argue that situated art can provide new insights into human situatedness along with generating new artistic methods. Such artistic approaches to the study of human situatedness are complementary to scientific approaches, since creative research practices emphasise the role of personal or subjective experiences where scientific practices generally revolve around empirical data and measurable variables. Or, as Biggs & Karlsson put it, “in the sciences, ... the subjectivity that accompanies experience is usually seen as an undesired variable that is to be controlled rather than enhanced” (2012, p. 90). This difference in emphasis is particularly important for the study of human situatedness, as the arts view widens the picture by emphasising that human experience is never complete and is bounded by the human body (Haraway, 1988; Crowther, 1993). Moreover, art has the capacity to move beyond observations and measurements of aspects of social structures and the behaviour of individuals, to instead probe actual social change. By doing so, art actively challenges people to understand or make sense of the new reality the change brings about.

As I will explain in what follows, however, art should consider the main actors in aesthetic production and experience, the artist and the spectator, as situated beings if art is to make critical contributions to the study of human situatedness.

2 The Situated Artist

An increasing number of artists are already contributing to our understanding of our situated nature and are actively developing methods for doing so. Whereas artists traditionally addressed real-world issues from within their studios, today they are increasingly moving beyond the conventions of studio practice and, moreover, not confining their work to the realm of art. Instead, they are taking positions within the contexts they are investigating, and creating work in situ so as to directly intervene in real-world situations.

Situated Artistic Approaches

In my curatorial practice, I often work with artists on projects that address the impact of technology, and I have closely observed this shift over recent years. While artists have often approached me with preconceived ideas for technology-driven art experiences that address the impact of technology in one way or another, an increasing number now propose immersing themselves in a context where technology makes an impact, to subsequently work their way towards an artistic outcome. Interestingly, these more situated approaches to addressing the impact of technology are not limited to the adoption of novel methods. The choice for a more situated approach is informed by a conceptual shift away from technology's direct consequences and towards a focus on its broader impact and more long-term or infrastructural effects (see, e.g., Van Dartel & Jonsson, 2014). Rather than, for instance, reflecting on how technological developments will affect users directly, the new tendency is to address their broader socio-ethical implications (see, e.g., Van Dartel and Nigten, 2014; 2016).

Case 1: 75W

A case in point is the artist duo Cohen Van Balen's project 75W, which addresses how the power relation between consumers of electronics and those who assemble them in factories is mediated by design. The project cleverly foregrounds an ethical dimension of consumer electronics design by radically turning this power relationship around: For 75W, Cohen Van Balen collaborated with a choreographer who wrote a sequence of dancelike movements for factory workers at their assembly belt; the choreography subsequently determined the design of a technological artefact. Cohen Van Balen could have easily (and at a fraction of the cost) staged and documented this assembly-line choreography in their studio space in London, but instead they did so in a factory in China, where consumer electronics are actually made, with people working there. By developing and implementing their design scenario in the actual context of the manufacture of consumer electronics, rather than merely rendering it in representational form, Cohen Van Balen consciously embedded themselves in the context where technology has the impact they aimed to address. Therefore, the choreography – and consequently the design of the object produced – are not informed by existing information on factory spaces and the labour performed there, or by Cohen Van Balen's assumptions about it, but by the actual dynamics between factory workers and their production environment.

In addition, because 75W was subsequently exhibited as an installation that includes video of the choreography and a collection of the resulting technological artefacts (see Figure 1), the viewer's aesthetic experience of the work has a direct material relationship with the manufacturing context and its dynamics. The export of the artefacts from China to exhibition spaces in Western countries completes the reversal of the power relationship between the consumers and the producers of technology; the movements of the factory workers in China determined the design of a technology that would be (culturally) consumed in the West. Thus, both the production and the experience of 75W are situated. Since the viewers' experience completes the

concept, here, aesthetic production and experience can even be considered to overlap. They merge in an attempt to reveal, or enhance our understanding of, the situated nature of human beings: that is, how producers, designers and consumers of technology are related through its value chain, and how the power relations between those actors have ethical implications that are often obscured by the geographical distances between them. 75W therefore helps us to understand the ethics of human situatedness in a globalised world.

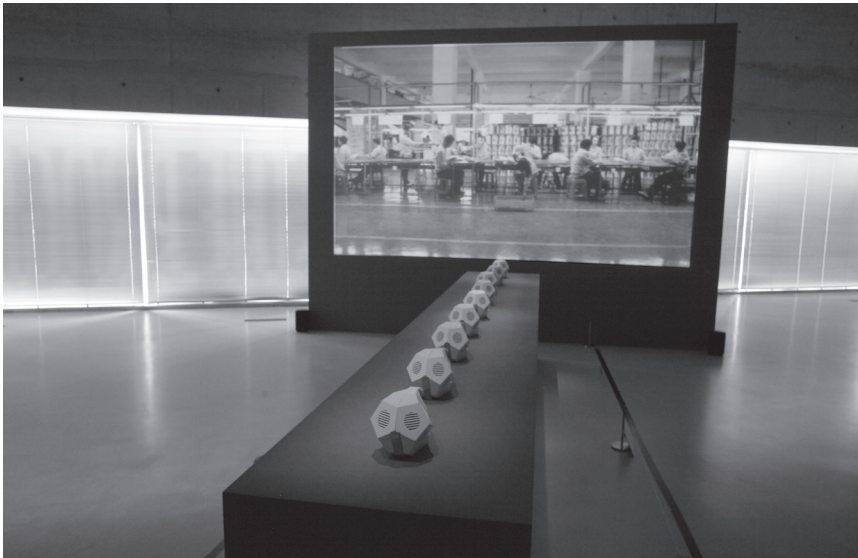


Figure 1: 75W (2014) by Cohen Van Balen, as exhibited in *The Progress Trap* (2014), curated by Michel van Dartel, Boris Debackere and Michelle Kasprzak for the Dutch-Electronic Art Festival. Photo: Rick Messemaker.

Case 2: Turtle 1

Another example of a project that studies the impact of technology by taking a situated approach is *Turtle 1* (2012–ongoing), by artist Melle Smets

and sociologist Joost van Onna, who have looked at the informal economies that have emerged around technological waste. To study one such economy, Smets and Onna positioned themselves in an area near the Ghanaian city of Kumasi called Suame Magazine, where an estimated 200,000 highly specialised and skilled mechanics live by restoring, collecting and recycling parts of wrecked cars shipped there from all over the world. In an effort to better understand how this informal economy worked, Smets and Van Onna decided to move against the market-driven stream of wrecked cars being transported to Ghana. Instead of following it, they set up a team of local mechanics in Suame Magazine to build a car in situ and subsequently export it to Europe.



Figure 2: Turtle 1 (2012–ongoing) by Melle Smets and Joost van Onna, as exhibited in *Turtle 1: The Sequel* (2014), curated by Michel van Dartel for V2_, Institute for the Unstable Media. Photo: Teun Vonk.

Besides resulting in the first car ever to have been exported to Europe from Ghana, the project also led to a detailed development plan to increase the value generated by local mechanics from car scraps transported to Suame Magazine. This outcome of the artists' intervention in a local informal economy is currently being implemented in collaboration with a local development company. An increase in value could improve the living conditions of many mechanics working in Suame Magazine. Improving livelihoods in Suame Magazine also, however, patently means sustaining, and potentially even strengthening, the unjust practice of depositing waste in less economically developed global areas. The internal ethical conflict that the project provokes by increasing the surplus value the mechanics can realise from the scraps while simultaneously sustaining a global phenomenon based on inequality illuminates the ethical complexity of our globalised waste economy and reveals this "hidden" impact of technology. It goes without saying that the project's outcomes and success in addressing these issues result from its direct intervention in the situation the artistic concept sought to address. Rather than reflecting on that situation from within an art studio and working from a preconceived plan, Smets and Van Onna embedded themselves in it by developing the project in situ and allowing the local dynamics of the informal economy to inform and shape both the project's artistic concept and its outcomes.

Art Beyond Representation

Both Turtle 1 and 75W not only illustrate the importance of more situated approaches in art but also point out how they go hand in hand with more situated conceptual perspectives on the issues the art addresses. The Turtle 1 project would not have been possible to realise had it ignored the implicit information present in the dynamics between local actors and their surroundings. Adopting a situated method, however, also greatly contributed to the insights that the project provided into the complex relationship between different actors in local informal economies and the global economy. The 75W

project also serves as an illustrative example of how situated approaches can inform methodologies as well as contribute to conceptual insights into human situatedness. By taking a more embedded position within the consumer-electronics value chain, the project provides new empirical insight into the ethics of design, whereas a studio practice approach would effectively have resulted in the mere representation of assumptions and information about those ethics.

In summary, embedding oneself as an artist in the context of the issues one wishes to address is not only a methodological strategy that benefits the production and presentation of work; it is, first and foremost, a way to gain insight into the situated nature of human beings. The two cases discussed above, Turtle 1 and 75W, attempt to unravel human situatedness. More specifically, they demonstrate how human situatedness with respect to technology reaches much further than the use of that technology and its immediate consequences; humans are, for instance, also situated in the globalised value chains of technologies, through which they maintain dynamic relationships with all kinds of local and global actors in that chain. These examples also underline the importance of direct physical engagement with the context of the topics being dealt with. They even seem to suggest that situated art projects must (at least in part) be created on site to allow the information implicit in a context to inform the outcomes of the project. To allow this to happen, a work cannot be based on a blueprint with particular intended results but should instead be guided by a procedure or set of instructions (Suchman, 1987; Reffat & Gero, 1999; Simonsen et al., 2014). In other words, taking a situated approach means not only physically positioning oneself in the context under study but also willingly letting go of exclusive control over the outcomes of the creative process and potentially allowing other agents to inform those outcomes through a dynamic exchange of agency (Salter, 2015), a form of 'letting go', that elsewhere in this special issue is described as 'flow beyond systems'. In the case of art, such external influences may continue to alter the outcome during, or even after, presentation; giving the product of the creative process a character that more closely resembles a status update than a final result.

A particular situated art project cannot therefore be fully represented in one object at a certain time, as a work's situated character by definition implies that that work is distributed across people, places and times. The 75W project, for instance, cannot be reduced to an intervention in a factory; the viewers' experience of the artefacts is conceptually significant, as they *are* the consumers of the technological artefacts the choreography resulted in. The viewers complete the reversal of the power relationship between consumers and factory workers and are thereby *part* of the work. The Turtle 1 project cannot be reduced to an intervention either: the discussions between representatives of the Dutch automobile industry and Suame Magazine's development company around the insights resulting from the intervention are conceptually significant to the artwork. The work's aesthetic effects even include the project's potential impact on people's livelihoods in Suame Magazine and on the ethical responsibilities of the automobile industry.

Considering themselves as situated in the wider world rather than merely within the realm of art, situated artists move beyond the conventions of studio practice embedding themselves in the contexts they are investigating. As I will explain in the next section, however, artists should also consider their spectators as situated beings if art is to make critical contributions to the unravelling of human situatedness.

3 The Situated Spectator

Considering spectators as situated beings implies that an aesthetic experience is by definition unique, never complete, and bounded by the physical body (Haraway, 1988; Crowther, 1993). Not only does situated art entail experiences that are unique for every viewer and distributed across people, times and places, but they also blur the line between authorship and viewership. As I have mentioned, situated art entails that viewers are also situated and therefore by definition actively contribute to their own experiences of creative outcomes. Consequently, control over the process of creation is

distributed between the artist and the audience members. This means artists must not only allow other actors to influence the *production* of aesthetic experiences but also take into account the influence of the situated audience members *experiencing* them. This influence can, however, be put to productive use.

Case 3: Upside Down Goggles

Take, for instance, the work of artist Carsten Höller, who explicitly aims to bring about experiences that are “like an expedition, a conscious decision to get confused, to end up somewhere else. Not the idea of some visionary who says “This way, follow me!”” (Spence, 2011). Instead of creating artworks that prescribe what should happen to the audience, Höller makes creative use of the active contributions viewers make to their aesthetic experiences of his work. In his long-term research on “inverted vision”, for instance, he has created aesthetic experiences based on a classic experiment by Kohler (1962) in which human vision was inverted using goggles with mirrors inside. In the most recent iteration of this project, Höller provided audience members with similar goggles and invited them onto a rooftop terrace with a spectacular view over London. After a brief period of adaptation to the inversion, some people attempted to walk to the edge of the terrace to view the city upside down, while others directly turned around to face the building and visually explore its architecture through the glasses. Still others never even seemed to notice their more distant surroundings at all and instead immediately began interacting with other audience members, spontaneously coming up with various types of playful interaction based on their inverted views (see Figure 7). Although Höller developed the glasses and carefully selected surroundings that would be interesting to explore with inverted vision, the aesthetic experience was in large part based on the audience’s own contributions. This made the event unique for every audience member and represented an embrace of the idea that aesthetic experience, just like any other type, is never

complete and is bounded by the unique embodiment of the individual undergoing it.



Figure 3: Upside Down Goggles (1994–ongoing) by Carsten Höller, as worn in the exhibition *Decision* (2015), curated by Ralph Rugoff for the Hayward Gallery. Photo: Maksim Kalanep.

Art practices like Höller’s that embrace the audience’s active contribution to its own aesthetic experience demonstrate that our notion of the “viewer” or “spectator” is obsolete, since it implies a *passive* role in the reception of art (Rancière, 2009). Although one could refer to an active viewer as a “user”, as is commonly done in the domain of design, the term “user” is nowadays associated more with the average consumer than with a unique individual (Sterling, 2005). Allowing unique differences between people to play a role in aesthetic production and experience means accepting that such experience

is never complete and is always circumscribed by the spectator's embodiment. This turn toward a more situated view in the field of art calls for new terminology we can use to refer to the main actors involved in aesthetic production and experience. More than that, it challenges our understanding of what art essentially *is*. Referring to art as "situated" signals that art is no longer something to look at or listen to from a distance but a call to action: a confrontation, intervention, or subversion that challenges us to understand or make sense of something (Noë, 2015). Situated art implies a learning process with respect to the implicit knowledge that is present in a context (Simonsen et al., 2014), and it challenges us to gain an understanding of our own situated nature. It permits a causal role to be played by the context in which art is produced and allows active contributions from those who experience them, while simultaneously making audience members and users aware of the situated nature of human beings. Although technically all art is situated (*ibid.*), the tendencies and examples I have discussed indicate that we are seeing an unprecedented interest in human situatedness within the domain of art.

4 Conclusion

Modern technology and globalisation have caused human situatedness to stretch far beyond our direct physical surroundings. From living in cities that are more and more being developed around data to operating within an increasingly inscrutable global economy; where technology rapidly develops, the incomprehensibility of our situatedness inevitably increases. Nowadays, we maintain dynamic relationships with local and global actors that are obscured from direct view, making it difficult to grasp the full implications of our behaviour and to comprehend how that very same behaviour is triggered or shaped by factors that are equally foreign to us. These developments create unprecedented urgencies to understand the ways in which we are situated in the world. We need to regain insight into our entanglement with environmental, social and cultural factors, because how are we to advance society

when we cannot even grasp the relationship between our own actions and the world around us?

As the art projects Turtle 1 and 75W discussed above clearly demonstrate, art can contribute to unravel such complex relationships in ways other disciplines cannot. However, as I have argued, art can only be productive in its contribution to understanding human situatedness under the condition that 1.) artists make effective use of their own situatedness and 2.) their audiences are also regarded as situated beings. Fortunately, the current transformative moment for art, which I referred to above as a situated turn, seems to bring more emphasis on these two qualifications. This in turn introduces both methodological challenges and conceptual opportunities for the field and gives rise to an urgent need to gain a better understanding of what it means for art practices and pedagogies when aesthetic creation and experience are distributed across people, places and times.

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Next New Action
(3d)

Assess your creative potential for leadership and consulting

COS Curriculum
Creators for Organisations & Society

25 days & 1d/8h coaching for master's piece

Creating my Master's piece
Writers space *
Photography & Film *
Freestyle *

* choose one – or more (optional)

Craft your ideas and developments and bring them into the world. Act!

Group in collective flow
(5d)

Deep dive generative group dynamics

Flow peer group
(3 x 1d)

Your homebase for orientation, integration & individual learning

**Whole System:
Co-Creating new structures for collaboration**
(2,5d)

Futuring, working with large groups and networks for transformational change

COS Conference active participation
(2,5d)

Engage on stage, show your intention and action for organisations & society

Integrating somatic intelligence in high performance teams
(4d)

Awaken somatic intelligence for generative change

The COS-Certified Curriculum “Creating Organisations & Society”

New Creations in Organisations & Society originate in the undivided source of sensing, feeling, thinking. Acting from there we make a difference. In this curriculum you will touch the source, develop your inner world and come out with new resources for action in the outer world. It's challenging for you and others!

We designed the curriculum for **mindful people** who:

- Wish to live and work closer to their calling and aspiration.
- Desire to go on a journey of transformation and tangible action.
- Want to intentionally achieve better, more creative results in the organisations they own or work for.
- Change their surroundings collaboratively, mindfully and powerfully.
- Direct intention and generative power towards shared development.
- Enter uncharted territory.

Here and now modules address individual, group and organisational learning spaces and offer learning on the spot in the here and now. You practice presencing and learn how to intervene in the moment – here and now. This is where immediate change happens.

Flow and grow together through action learning. You come closer to yourself, develop ways to generatively hold your many facets, connect with others in this way and manifest your actions from a fresh, supportive

social network. A learning through experiencing and acting, experiencing and acting ...

Craft and manifest: During your learning journey you are continuously crafting your own masters' piece. This artistic, scientific or freestyle „piece of work“ is your gift and your challenge to yourself and to Organisations & Society: The one you work or live in or the one you are intending to create. A project development, a new business idea, a book, a new way of working and living.

Your calling triggers and shapes your learning journey throughout all modules. We support you in making a pearl-chain, your intentional learning process is the pearl string. – Beautiful!

COS Certified Curriculum: Creators for Organisation & Society

For more information please contact:

Dr. Andrea Schueller: andrea@cos-collective.com

Dr. Maria Spindler: maria@cos-collective.com

Costs approx.: € 5.600,00 + VAT

Become a Friend & Member of COS!

Join the COS movement and become a Friend&Member of COS! COS is a home for reflective hybrids and a growing platform for co-creation of meaningful, innovative forms of working & living in and for organizations and society, between and beyond theory and practice. We invite you to become an active member of COS.

Being a part of COS you have access to our products and happenings. As a Friend&Member, you carry forward the COS intention of co-creating generative systems through mindful, fresh mind-body action. Let's connect in and for novel ways around the globe!

Access points for your participation & future contribution are:

- Mutual inspiration & support at the COS-Conference
- Development & transformation at COS-Creations Seminars
- Creative scientific publishing & reading between and beyond theory and practice
- COS LinkedIn Virtual Community
- And more ...

The Friend&Membership fee is €200,- + 20% VAT for 18 months. Why 18 months? We synchronize the Friend&Membership cycle with the COS-conference rhythm and 3 COS journal editions.

Your 18 month COS Friend & Membership includes:

- 2 editions of the COS-journal: 2 issues, 2 copies each issue – one for you and one for a friend of yours = 4 hard copies, 2 issues for the value of € 112.-
- Conference fee discount of € 150.-
- COS-Creations: Special discount of 25 % for one seminar of your choice each year

Send your application for membership to office@cos-collective.com

Join COS, a Home for Reflective Hybrids

The future is an unknown garment that invites us to weave our lives into it. How these garments will fit, cover, colour, connect and suit us lies in our (collective) hands. Many garments from the past have become too tight, too grey, too something...and the call for new shapes and textures is acknowledged by many. Yet changing clothes leaves one naked, half dressed in between. Let's connect in this creative, vulnerable space and cut, weave and stitch together.

Our target group is reflective hybrids – leaders, scientists, consultants, and researchers from all over the world who dare to be and act complex. Multi-layered topics require multidimensional approaches that are, on the one hand, interdisciplinary and, on the other hand, linked to theory and practice, making the various truths and perspectives mutually useful.

If you feel you are a reflective hybrid you are very welcome to join our COS movement, for instance by:

- Visiting our website: www.cos-collective.com
- Getting in touch with COS-Creations. A space for personal & collective development, transformation and learning. Visit our website: www.cos-collective.com
- Following our COS-Conference online: www.cos-collective.com
- Subscribing to our newsletter: see www.cos-collective.com
- Subscribing to the COS Journal: see www.cos-collective.com
- Ordering single articles from the COS Journal: www.cos-collective.com
- Becoming a member of our LinkedIn group: go to www.linkedin.com and type in "Challenging Organisations and Society,reflective hybrids" or contact Tonnie van der Zouwen: office@cos-collective.com

SAVE THE DATE
4th COS Conference
19. – 21. September 2019
in Venice, Italy

The Journal with Impact

The Journal “Challenging Organisations and Society . reflective hybrids® (COS)” is the first journal to be dedicated to the rapidly growing requirements of reflective hybrids in our complex 21st-century organisations and society. Its international and multidisciplinary approaches balance theory and practice and show a wide range of perspectives in and between organisations and society. Being global and diverse in thinking and acting outside the box are the targets for its authors and readers in management, consulting and science.