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ARTFUL INQUIRY FOR UNCERTAIN TIMES

THIS ARTICLE INTRODUCES ARTFUL inquiry as a transformation process supporting mental health and thriving in the designer while empowering her to contribute to the creation of sustainable futures. Designing in turbulent times and tackling large-scale challenges such as climate, biodiversity, and energy crises require new measures both for what we design and our engagement in the design process. When witnessing the current destabilizations in the world, we may find ourselves individually and collectively stressed by events. Met with increasing uncertainty, there is a tendency to look outside of ourselves for solutions—for instance, to new technology. However, this carries the risk of bypassing collective and individual blind spots such as the inner place and state of mind from which we operate and lead ourselves. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines mental health as “a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community. It is an integral component of health and well-being that underpins our individual and collective abilities to make decisions, build relationships and shape the world we live in.”¹ This highlights the importance of mental health as an inner foundation, not just for facing instability and stressful times as individuals but also for actively taking part in transforming our society.

If mental health enables us to reshape the world, we need design approaches that value and prioritize this within the actual process. In this study, we examine how the artful inquiry process can support the thriving and well-being of designers as part of daily design practice—and

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1. "Mental health," *World Health Organization Health Topics*, accessed March 6, 2023, www.who.int/news-room/factsheets/detail/mental-health-strengthening-our-response.
2. L. Darsø and C. Meltzer, "Arts-based Interventions as a Series of Methods to Access Precensing" in *Advances in Presencing, Volume II: Individual Approaches in Theory* U, O. Gunnlaugson and W. Brendel eds. (Trifoss Business Press, 2020).

through this, their ability to engage more fully in creative processes. The project was carried out in 2022–23 at the Royal Danish Academy in collaboration with the Union for Architects and Designers and the Danish Design Association and was funded by the Velliv Association. In a practice-led approach, 32 professional designers were invited to a course comprised of two workshops where they experienced artful inquiry as a method for inner and outer transformation. These were followed by two individual coaching sessions to help integrate the approaches in practice. Subsequently, we conducted semi-structured interviews to discern the participants' gain from the course. In Denmark, as in similar economies, the design labor market is under increasing pressure from companies demanding loose affiliation and freelancing. This leads to short-term employment and fierce competition, also spurred by global online players offering cheap solutions for standard tasks. We find the experiences of these self-employed designers to be a salient example of people existing in unstable working situations, which may evoke recognition in the broader field and provide designers and design managers with ways to include artful inquiry in practice.

Artful inquiry through arts- and nature-based interventions

Artful inquiry is an approach to individual and collective transformation processes developed within organizational creativity and management education. It has shown potential for empowering people, enabling them to access tacit knowledge by engaging their "body, mind, heart and spirit"² and strengthen personal resources such as empathy, trust, and meaningfulness directly in practical creative design processes. Through sequential investigations using arts- and nature-based interventions, artful inquiry forms an open, yet structured, inquiry process enabling the exploration of professional and personal burning questions. Arts- and nature-based interventions involve working with artistic materials such as clay, paper, or crayons or outside in natural surroundings. The methods support an open

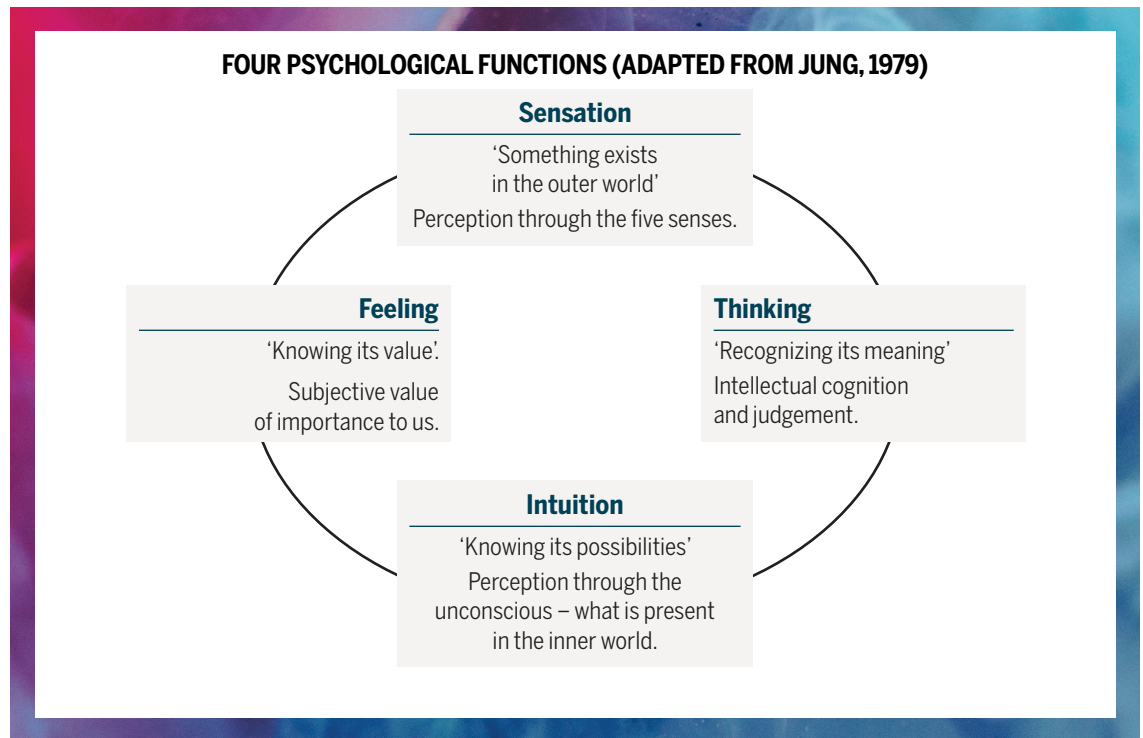
awareness with the intention of creating new insights and change. The interventions originate in art therapy and nature therapy, yet within artful inquiry the focus is moved from a personal therapeutic process to exploring a topic within a design process. When selecting the interventions, we draw on both the creative and health benefits to ensure that the selected methods present a potential for enhancing both creativity and mental well-being. Clay, for example, may have a positive effect on our mood and lower our levels of cortisol while opening the mind to inner imagination. Nature-based interventions, meanwhile, build on nature's effects as a "restorative environment" that may restore our nervous system to its original state, potentially reducing stress symptoms and increasing creative abilities.

An inner and outer process

Our model of artful inquiry builds on Carl Gustav Jung's four psychological functions—intuition, feeling, sensation, and thinking (see Figure 1, p 6) and Otto Scharmer's Theory U. Together, the theories form a framework for changemaking in practice that connects the quality of the results to the inner awareness and attention of the individual. The four functions relate to the movement of energy in our psychic activity, and each function is equally important for having a comprehensive understanding of the world. According to Jung, we often develop one dominant function, and within our modern, technology-based societies, the fast-thinking function tends to dominate and leave the others behind. This creates a separation between the different inner dimensions, both in the individual and collectively as a society. However, the functions are like the directions of a compass, where navigation points can be shifted and conventions changed. By consciously involving the other functions through artful inquiry, we aim at realigning the designer's inner compass and, through this, creating mental balance for the individual while working. Balancing the four functions may potentially create small instances of renewal in our psychic energy and enable the body and mind to open to new impressions and insight.

When including more ways of knowing, the designer moves away from one-dimensional ways of working to bridging the separated inner parts in a form of fruitful co-creation.

FIGURE 1



Theory U informs the layout of the workshop process as it places equal focus on the outer situation and the inner experience of the person exploring. This mindful process facilitates a shift in awareness that enables a deeper investigation of a situation through “presencing.” In this process, our focus expands from our personal ego-system to an eco-system awareness. Darsø and Meltzer find that the arts-based interventions can assist the U-process by supporting a shift in the inner place from which we operate.

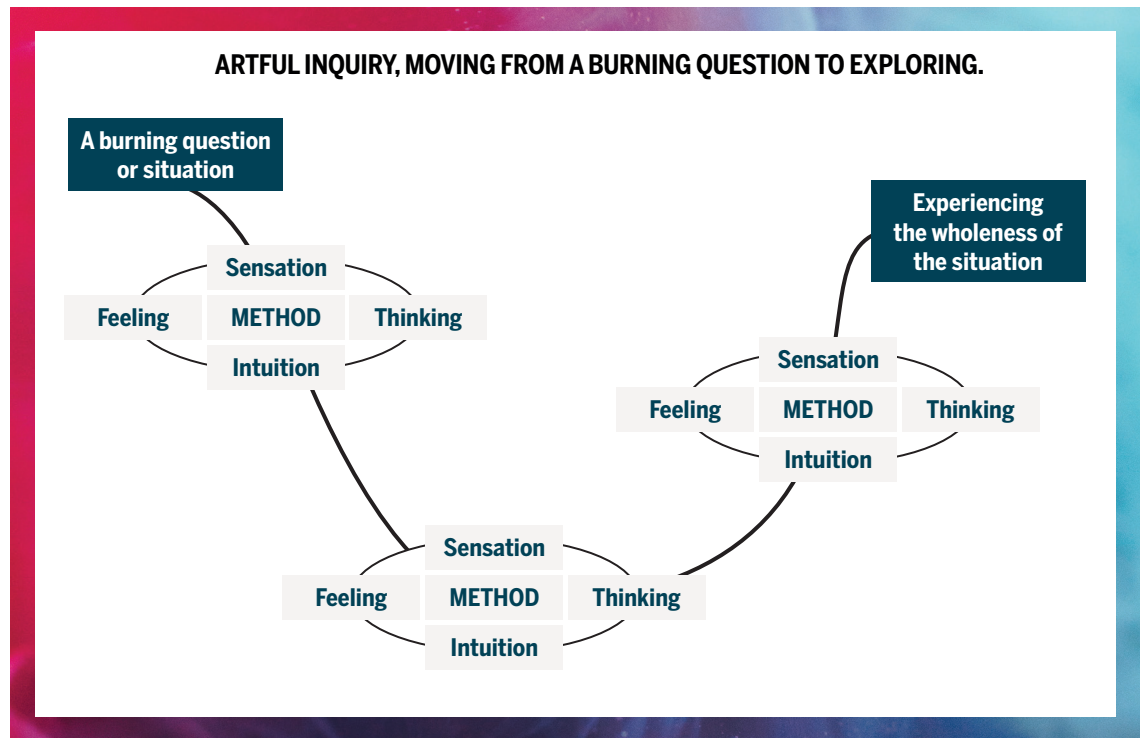
From a Jungian perspective, artful inquiry through arts- and nature-based interventions supports a “dive” into a subject through our different ways of knowing. This allows us to experience contact with and unfold tacit knowledge from our personal unconscious and collective unconscious. This embodied knowledge may reveal blind spots and, in turn, renew our conscious connection to the greater systems of which we are a part. Such sense of cohesion is a core element of mental health, as is a practice of regular dialogue with one’s inner experience, according to Jung. (See Figure 2, p 7).

Our case

Eight professional designers arrived at the workshop space in the morning and were welcomed by the two facilitators. A table with artist materials was laid out: pens, colors, crayons, clay, and paper. After introductions, the group created a “codex” for a learning space to enable trust in the relations and the process of leaning into the unknown.

They then embarked on a personal artful inquiry initiated with an individual question each of them had prepared. During the day, they moved through a facilitated sequence of methods to activate their feelings, thoughts, intuition, and senses in ways that set aside critical thinking and allowed for new impressions to surface. The atmosphere shifted between focused silence when modeling in clay with their eyes closed, to buzzing with insights as they shared in pairs, and expressions of being touched by each other when reading aloud the poems they crafted. Throughout the day, they were guided to use the most vibrant insight from one exercise as the starting point for the next. This ensured a continued dialogue with their situation, allowing for new

FIGURE 2



perspectives and insights to arise. For some, it was primarily joyous and playful; for others, sadness or feelings of loss or anger surfaced. Being reminded that there were no demands to perform or results to produce helped most participants relax—and the surprise element often made them smile or feel touched by what had come forth and how it connected to previous insights.

Their inquiries evolved around similar themes across the group and shed light on the inner life and well-being of professional self-employed designers. We found there to be central themes across age, gender, and area of design across all 32 participants. First and foremost, finding ways to balance income, personal life, and being creative was touched upon by every participant—several describing a feeling of constantly being on the move, always looking for the next assignment, leaving no time for immersion. Intense periods of work would inevitably give way to quiet phases that were hard to enjoy due to feelings of uncertainty, low energy, and mood swings. The majority have regular considerations about whether to continue

as self-employed or seek employment to have more financial stability. Another widespread experience was loneliness and a lack of community—this also occurred when working in an office community. The competition is fierce and the designers felt they needed to “keep up appearances” when meeting clients or at design-related events. The overall impression of their working situations was that they spent a lot of time and energy navigating instability rather than being immersed in the creative practice they craved. Hence, the workshops were welcomed by every participant—a relief of being able to share honestly what was really going on beneath the surface.

The many stories we have witnessed show that an artful inquiry process based on arts- and nature-based interventions supports several elements relating to individual well-being and mental health—and how this, in turn, empowers the designer in her ability to navigate in times of turbulence. We present their stories here to elucidate the transformative potential of artful inquiry in relation to the above challenges and how

**FIGURE 3**

Exploring the situation through the stakeholder map in clay.

it may help designers navigate the uncertainty of their working situation.

Elements of artful inquiry that support mental well-being

INNER BALANCE

When the participants become aware of the four functions and their equal value, they begin to articulate themselves in new ways, realizing how they often rationalize their ways of working to explain and validate themselves. They feel it as “grounding” and “a sense of being whole.” Says one participant: “It feels right, and it is a lovely reunion with the person I once was, or that small part of me, that I once had.” Later he describes his newfound personal resource as energy: “There was a resource inside me that I could open to...an energy inside that I had forgotten about, where maybe I was drowning a little too much in worries before.” Validating all their ways of knowing brings the participants a sense of inner balance, an anchoring in their own creative resources and, through this, renewed self-confidence. When including more ways of knowing, the designer moves away from one-dimensional ways of working to bridging the separated inner

parts in a form of fruitful co-creation. This pulls the creative process home, leading to new learning and the production of original material.

CALM AND FOCUS

The participants experienced an inner “sense of space” characterized by calm and openness, described by one as “a feeling of coming home.” Several participants described how this space is a new place from which to work, “a sensory open space for letting in information” or a place for “accessing a limitless source.” One describes the feeling of calm as “more reflected...soft and thoughtful...I don’t act as fast and think more about the actions I take or consider the whole situation.” Elaborating on how this space makes her feel, she explains “I feel happier...[because] I’m creating from a more... spacious foundation, instead of it just being something that needs fixing.” In her work as an in-demand and high-performing project manager, she usually feels stress if she slows down—thinking that there must be something she has forgotten or overlooked, if she has time for a break. Finding inner calm was an eye-opener for many. Several found that it brought a different kind of effectiveness, focus, and trust to their decision-making, their decisions now connected to a renewed sense of meaningfulness. Through continued experiences of this, several designers suddenly saw the value of small nourishing breaks (e.g., going for a 10–15 minute walk focused on a single question, or simply letting thoughts settle). The breaks themselves feed renewed energy and focus into the continued working day. By reaching an inner space of calm in artful inquiry and building this as a personal resource, the designer may create a virtuous cycle, enabling her decision-making power as well as increasing her ability to stay connected to meaningfulness in uncertain working situations.

The wholeness of the situation

Many participants were surprised by how seemingly different insights arising from continued exploration slowly revealed a fuller picture of their situation. The aforementioned

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3. D. C. Wahl, *Designing Regenerative Cultures* (Padstow: Triarchy Press, 2016) 288 pp.



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**FIGURE 4**

Taking notes after a medicine walk.

project manager, through modeling the stakeholders in her working situation in clay, was able to feel herself stand in and start to accept the very situation that was “eating her from the inside.” Seeing the intensity of the bread-and-butter jobs squeezing the other areas of her life, she continued on a medicine walk, asking, “where should the money come from?” Experiencing connection and grounding on the walk led her to explore flourishing by drawing a plant and asking, “how do I find balance and joy?” Learning to walk or sit with a question and receiving concrete answers was new to her. She described how her body and mental state focused on working with this particular question. “It helps the thoughts to flow in a small part of one’s whole situation and meet...truths.” Asking “how to handle my feeling of being locked-in” she saw a cluster of small fungi on the ground, in community—and laughed. She felt a sense of closure to the story and a sense of calm—“maybe the answer was to slow down, be calm and listen.” Hence, when we commit ourselves to dive into a subject through our different ways of knowing in artful inquiry, it allows for deeper insights and patterns to surface.

ENABLING TRANSFORMATION

According to Jung, the self-exploration of inner experiences is essential for our ability to detach ourselves from prevailing sets of values and worldviews, enabling us to look beyond the spirit of the time and integrate material from the individual and collective unconscious. This empowers the designer to navigate multiple perspectives and unify disparate elements, thereby engaging with paradoxes and ambiguity, and work with complexity from a deeper source of knowing. Daniel Christian Wahl, a consultant in regenerative innovation, describes the importance of embracing uncertainty to enable real change: “The art of transformative cultural innovation is to a large extent about making peace with ‘not knowing’ and living into the questions more deeply, making sure we are asking the right questions, paying attention to our relationships and how we all bring forth a world, not just through what we are doing, but through the quality of our being.”³ Inquiry means “to ask,” and artful inquiry helps the designer stay open, trust the process of inquiry to be guided by insights, new questions, and answers that arise from the different ways of knowing.

Where to apply artful inquiry

The participants in our study helped elucidate the many potential uses of artful inquiry through their own experiments, applications, and suggestions for further use. Through this we have identified several areas of use for this practice, which add nuances to Darsø’s work with artful inquiry for organizational innovation and management education.

- **Personal leadership:** Exploring personal and professional questions and situations
- **Co-creation:** Exploring the questions and situation together and creating a comprehensive and shared understanding
- **Project management:** Identifying the team focus and finding direction. Being connected to social purpose and meaningfulness

The participants’ experiences with integrating the methods revealed several attention points and possible barriers for successful integration of this practice. Some of these relate to creating

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4. G. Bobroff, Carl Jung. *Knowledge in a Nutshell* (London: Arcturus Publishing Limited, 2020) 240 pp.
5. C. O. Scharmer and K. Kaufer, *Leading from the Emerging Future: From Ego-System to Eco-System economies* (Oakland: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2013) 304 pp.

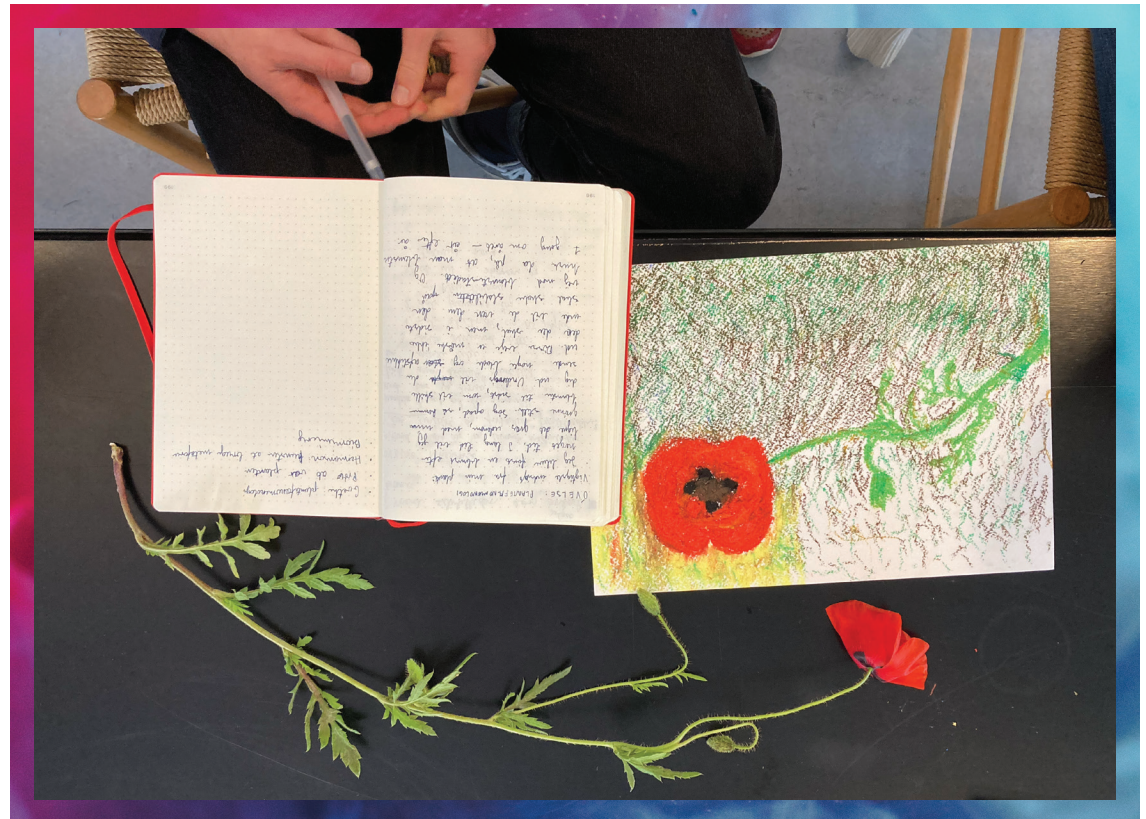


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with innovation and co-creation for change management in global health care as well as clients in non-profit, public, and commercial sectors.

FIGURE 5

Reflections after making the plant drawing.



new routines around it. Beneath the practical structures, however, runs the necessity for a deeper change in the underlying values of design practice. Artful inquiry represents an incorporation of a mindset that is open to working with mental well-being as an integrated part of professional work practice and accepting the equal value of our four ways of knowing. This may seem a daunting task in a society driven by rapid accelerations; however, as Jung argued, the lack of access to our irrational and mythopoetic qualities must be dealt with if “humanity is not to destroy itself through the might of its own technology and science.”⁴

Enhancing the artful dimension in design practice may lead to more comprehensive and holistic insights, thereby representing a way forward to the sustainable future our global society needs. In the words of Scharmer: “We cannot transform the behavior of systems unless we transform the quality of attention that people

apply to their actions within those systems, both individually and collectively.”⁵ Within the timespan of our research, many of the participants reported how they started seeing the value in the “soft” approach; they experienced the health benefits, witnessed creative results in practice, and several described how using the methods may create time, as the slowness they experienced led to increased focus, trust, and more effective decision-making. The potential of artful inquiry to support thriving and mental health in design practice may thus be a promising counterpoint to current accelerated processes and, hopefully, inspire our field to diverge from “business as usual.” ■

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