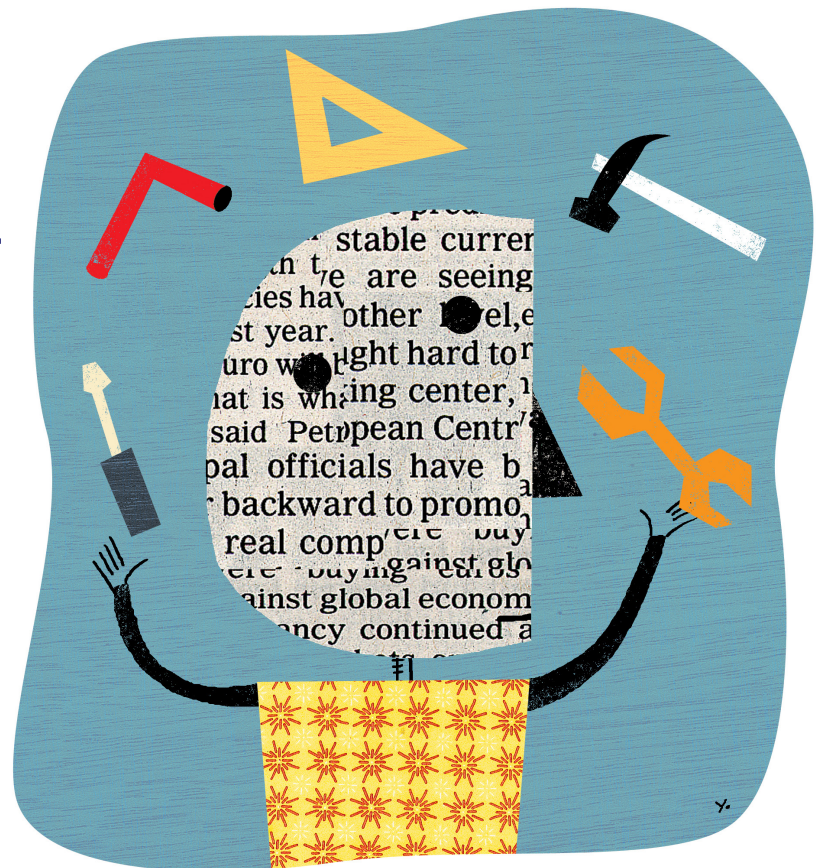# ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE AND ABJECTION

A systems-psycho-dynamic reflection on Millie Brown´s *Nexus Vomitus*

Juergen Radel

Abstract

This article introduces an experiential teaching approach that uses a controversial art performance, *Nexus Vomitus* by Millie Brown, to explore complex aspects of organizational change. The performance challenges students to reflect on discomfort, resistance, and the role of change agents, illustrating the paradox of needing to disrupt while risking rejection. By reflecting on this performance, students gain insights into the dynamics of change management — specifically, the value of questioning ingrained structures, dealing with emotional responses, and preparing for the challenging role of being a change agent. The article is written from the author's perspective as a lecturer and includes reflections shared by students. It serves as a teaching resource for facilitators, particularly in higher education.

The Performance as a Metaphor for Change

In 2011, abjection artist Millie Brown collaborated with opera singers, Patricia Hammond and Zita Syme, in a unique performance that fused music with performance art, creating a painting with vomit. This article provides an overview of this intervention and explores its use in a university teaching session as an experiential learning approach [1–5]. It might be applicable in management training within the context of change management; however, I suggest using it with caution in such contexts because of the disruptive nature it might have on relationships with clients who are not open to experiential learning approaches (which are still uncommon in regular training sessions even if some advocate including them[6]). Viewing the performance beforehand is recommended and can be accessed on Millie Brown's website (SHOWStudio — scan the QR code or refer to the link provided at the end).

The performance can be described as 'abject art', a term associated with Julia Kristeva[7]. "The abject refers to the human reaction (horror, vomit) to a threatened breakdown in meaning caused by the loss of distinction between subject and object, or self and other."[8] Abject art involves using or presenting materials, objects or themes that are typically taboo. I discuss this concept in class when covering organizational silence[9,10] and the 'elephants in the room'[10,11] which are often — and sometimes deliberately — ignored during organizational change.

Denial is sometimes reinforced by social norms: we are taught to 'look away'[10] and, in organizations, we may adopt willful blindness towards abnormal behavior[11] as portrayed in the surreal dinner scene of Buñuel and Carrières movie, *The Phantom of Liberty*[12]. Brown's performance, involving bodily fluids (vomit) and taboo topics (some say bulimia), invites viewers to confront discomfort and question societal norms — an experience that can be valuable in change processes. By facing their own discomfort, students can better empathize with others, potentially enhancing their ability to provide support[13].

'Vomit painting' intentionally blurs the boundary between the artist's body, tools that are used, and her art, provoking a mix of repulsion and fascination. Unlike traditional artists using brushes that detach them from the color and the canvas, Brown integrates her body directly into her work, compelling the audience to reflect on the line between self and other — a potential analogy for examining one's role in change processes where we use tools and might develop a detached and functional view of the system we are working with. The self of the change agent is sometimes taken out of the equation, especially if we are working on a highly standardized change project.

Brown's performance in *Nexus Vomitus* serves as a metaphorical framework for reflecting on the role of organizational change agents and their level of attachment to, or detachment from, their client system.

Target Audience and Teaching Approach

Abject art confronts the audience's discomfort, pushing them to face their social norms, fears or prejudices. Change agents also encounter resistance from individuals who are hesitant to leave their 'comfort zone' or who fear the unknown. Through this lens, Brown's performance helps students grasp the complexities and psychological/ emotional aspects of change management — specifically, the value of questioning ingrained structures, navigating emotional responses, and preparing themselves for the role of a change agent who might face rejection (as the lecturer might face). The artist challenges established norms and confronts viewers with taboo subjects. This is similar to what a change agent does in organizations.

Typically, I show and discuss the performance in change-management classes for Masters' students, MBA students or executives. (I usually present a short version of the video, about five minutes long, but often pause it after three minutes to ease the tension that builds early on.) I

show it immediately after initial housekeeping information and a brief introduction to it, aiming to establish some comfort and credibility, both of which the video content may challenge. (Showing it later in the session reduces risk but also lessens its impact in the classroom.) To add an element of intrigue, I might place a vomit bag on each seat before class, sparking curiosity and providing a tangible reminder of the video.

Note: in rare cases, a participant may suffer from emetophobia — a specific phobia (ICD-11, 6803) involving an intense fear of vomiting or witnessing others vomit, as in Millie Brown's performance. This phobia is uncommon, although I once had a student with a sister who suffered from it. To address this unlikely possibility, I might say at the start, "If anyone suffers from emetophobia, you may want to step out now". If someone does (although this has not happened in my classes), it could prompt a discussion about how to integrate individuals who have missed the introductory change-experience.

Some suggest providing a trigger warning before showing the video, although such warnings can sometimes have no effect or even a counterproductive one [14–18]. I have opted not to provide one as this decision, in itself, can prompt a discussion about stress in change processes and whether impactful change can be achieved without stress for everyone involved. Typically, it cannot — but what does this mean for change agents who must initiate change and, to some extent, push people out of their comfort zone?

The underlying idea is that reflection occurs on multiple levels:

1. **Here-and-now:** The lecturer acts as a change agent, disrupting the classroom dynamic by showing the video and deviating from the typical lecture format.
2. **Student experience:** Students adopt the position of those affected by change.
3. **There-and-then:** Millie Brown, as the change agent in the performance, disrupts the system.
4. **System representation:** The singers symbolize the system impacted by the change.

By discussing the 'there-and-then' performance in the 'here-and-now' classroom setting, students can relate their immediate experience to broader organizational contexts. By reflecting on these parallels, students gain insights into similar situations within their own organizations.

The primary goal of this work, beyond examining the interaction between a change agent and resistance, is to help students recognize that distinguishing between genuine reflection and *wild fantasies* about what might be happening requires presence[19] and self-awareness, enabling them to leverage themselves as instruments in the role of a change agent.

Discussion about the performance highlights a paradoxical duality: whether elements are interpreted as 'good' or 'bad' depends upon one's perspective. This realisation allows

students to question their own viewpoints. Unfortunately, "[…] we still have the false dichotomy between good vs bad and the tendency to see bad leaders as 'others'."[20] This mindset risks creating splitting, rather than seeing opposites as "[…] implicit allies – correlative in the sense that they 'growth' each other and cannot exist apart."[21]

Audience Reaction

When I start a class with the video, most students are confused as they are anticipating something entirely different — even when I show the final image beforehand. They may be curious but, when faced with the reality of the video, strong emotions are often aroused — something I revisit afterwards in class in a discussion about broken expectations, habits formed from experiences, and the necessity of disrupting equilibrium to enable change[22]. This discussion also serves as a springboard to explore the fantasies we hold about future situations and how reality rarely aligns with our expectations.

Alongside those who are confused or disgusted, some students, observing others in the room, respond with laughter as a form of defense[23–25] — shifting their focus away from the video itself. Even these students, however, may feel discomfort as the video continues. To alleviate tension, I recommend hovering the mouse over the video so viewers can see the remaining playing-time. This can also lead to a later discussion about whether or not discomfort can be more manageable when we know how long it must be endured.

Another group, similar in size to those who laugh, turn away or even hide behind a hoodie or scarf, if available. Typically, their disgust manifests as a negative reaction toward the video — and perhaps toward me for presenting it. This response opens the door to a discussion about change-related issues such as stress, trust and resistance.

Both groups (those who laugh and those who turn away), send clear signals. In organizational transformations, however, these signals are often expressed more subtly. People may not share their reactions openly or may even be violently polite[26], making it harder to interpret their responses. This lack of clarity complicates efforts to set up support systems for individuals experiencing significant stress.

Performance Elements as a Structure for Reflection

The following section explores various aspects of the performance — the singers, Millie Brown and the painting process, each of which can be viewed paradoxically and interpreted in multiple ways — which I use to structure discussions and reflections after showing the video. The section includes metaphors and interpretations my students have offered, some of which are judgmental or normative. These responses may resonate strongly with some readers, potentially evoking strong emotions, and not at all with others. This mirrors the variability of

change interventions in which different individuals are affected to varying degrees, often unpredictably. At the end of this paper, I offer a synopsis of my students' reflections, focusing on these three key elements. I also include contributions that I may make to direct the students' attention if they do not make them, themselves. For teaching purposes, these reflections offer material for further exploration with different groups of students.

1. The Singers

Both the opera singers and the artists aim to convey meaningful experiences, yet their intentions diverge. Opera singers uphold and perpetuate classical traditions, while Millie Brown's abject art challenges the status quo. The singers blend into their environment but stand in sharp contrast to Brown. Visually, this contrast is marked by their attire. Dressed in white turtlenecks, they appear conservative and aligned with the system around them, presenting the romantic *Flower Duet*. They replicate the song's characters but without passion, reading from a music book. Their performance perpetuates tradition rather than creating something new, singing a piece that premiered in 1883.

This contrast illustrates a common theme in change processes: those who maintain stability often resist or become overshadowed by agents of change. The singers' detachment could reflect the role of organizational members who, though affected by change, choose to cling to familiar routines rather than engage with disruption. They pair up — which can be an indicator of a 'basic assumption group' that is diverted from purpose[27].

Despite performing the duet, the singers seem to be less powerful than Brown, the solo 'change agent' who dominates the scene. Partially obstructed by a wall, the singers are passive observers, unable to reach the glasses of colored milk below them, potentially to take them away, and they have a limited impact on the performance. However, they may serve to ease the audience's discomfort, providing a beautiful distraction from the unsettling aspects of the act. Their chanting even masks the sounds of vomiting, soothing both the viewers and perhaps the performer, like a lullaby. Some students have told me that they tried to focus on the song, rather than on what they see.

As they sing of invisible flowers, Brown brings them to life through her colorful liquid on the canvas, bridging the old song to a modern context. In Psychoanalysis, flowers are sometimes a symbol. For Sigmund Freud[28], they were a "[…] language of love, lust and longing […]"[29] when he was reflecting on puberty[30] — a time of life where the individual undergoes major changes that are often confusing and stressful, similar to the individual's experience in an intense organizational change process that helps the system to grow. The symbol of flowers in the performance could also insinuate (sexual) aggression[31], a phenomenon evoked by the singers and projected onto Millie Brown who introjects it and then expels it onto the canvas as a healthy way of processing it[32].

However, the singers appear to be oblivious of the vomiting, seemingly detached and finding comfort in the song's repetition. Alternatively, they may be aware of it but cling to the familiarity of the song for solace. One student likened them to priests performing an unsuccessful exorcism.

2. Millie Brown

Millie Brown stands as an unconventional element, embodying the 'shadow' in a Jungian sense[31]. Some view her as excessively strange; others see her as intriguingly so[19]. Her attire contrasts sharply with the singers in both color and style. Unlike them, she moves freely, unconfined by walls, as if invading and disrupting a system filled with music. Her movements are both graceful (or perhaps provocative) and deliberate, with a facial expression when she sits that students often interpret as arrogance — which leads to discussions about the physically demanding and harmful nature of her performance. Like her, change agents can be perceived as detached or arrogant, with little attention given to their personal struggles (which, for Brown, become apparent when she talks about the impact of her work on her personal health — see below).

Brown appears unhurried, executing each step with precision, even aligning the straws in the glasses of colored milk in the same direction. She seems to be in control of the process — though only to a point. She guides the process of painting a picture with pre-defined colors, but the outcome is unpredictable, much like certain change efforts.

She may appear as a disruptive or 'evil' presence in the room — a predator seemingly indifferent to others. However, subtle details suggest otherwise. For instance, her nails are painted white, matching the color scheme of the room and the singers. As the furthest extension of her body, they gently connect her to the system, hinting at an attempt to bridge the divide.

This gentleness, along with Brown's careful planning and intense self-preparation, become evident in the meticulously curated (and controlled) set-up. While she initially seems to invade the system, a closer look reveals that she operates only within a contained space — the canvas on the floor — leaving the rest of the system untouched. This metaphor suggests that, even when working with a small part of a whole, minor changes can feel overwhelming to some. Questions about how much change is considered either excessive or insufficient, and when it is perceived as genuine change, often arise in real-world practice [32–34].

Like other elements of the performance, Brown's act of painting through vomiting invites reflection on her role as a change agent. She is assertive and methodical. She exercises control in areas she can control and endures hardship in the process. And all this to create something new.

3. The Painting Process

In her performance, Brown *gives birth* to something, transforming what is repulsive into something potentially beautiful — or vice versa. By merging these extremes, she creates "complementary opposites" [20] throughout the piece.

Unlike a traditional painter, her process is intensely personal. Without a brush to separate her from the canvas, she, herself, becomes the brush, mixing color with bodily fluids, embedding her DNA in the artwork. Through vomiting, she purges her body, evoking Kristeva's ideas on the symbolic significance of fecal waste [7]:

> "Contrary to what enters the mouth and nourishes, what goes out of the body, out of its pores and openings, points to the infinitude of the body proper and gives rise to abjection. Fecal matter signifies, as it were, what never ceases to separate from a body in a state of permanent loss in order to become autonomous, distinct from the mixtures, alterations, and decay that run through it. That is the price the body must pay if it is to become clean and proper."

The act can be viewed as cleansing or as an aggressive display of female violence — a concept often refuted [35,36]. Brown creates space for what is usually suppressed or denied, even if it appears repulsive. Drinking and vomiting the liquid may symbolize different introjects; she takes them in but forcefully expels them. This forceful expulsion contrasts with the gentleness of accepting the introject, which seems almost lustful or in service of the system. She appears to enjoy her work, but this enjoyment is superficial, as the process has severe side-effects on her.

As a change agent, she demonstrates characteristics that not all change agents might share to the same extent: a clear vision, setting boundaries, and pushing herself to the limit:

> "She goes about the retching process with a kind of demure determination that is hard to watch, and even after all these years she doesn't seem very good at it. Those two middle fingers rummage around her throat for ages until they find the switch, and often release only a dribble. "The struggle makes the performance", she says. 'I think it's very human.'" [37]

One could argue that this is in service of the outcome, but for whose benefit? Ultimately, she seems to do it for herself and not to achieve something for the organization, which remains unclear and hidden. This might lead to a discussion about radical change agents in the form of the crusading reformer who "operates with an absolute ethic; what he sees is truly and totally evil with no qualification. Any means is justified to do away with it. The crusader is fervent and righteous, often self-righteous"[38].

In addition to the physical struggle, several aspects of her preparation are notable. Before consuming another color, her stomach must be completely empty. She drinks the colors in sequence — from lighter to darker shades — to avoid mixing. For the two-hour performance, she starts with an empty stomach, saying, "I hadn't eaten in days because I didn't know how long it took for my stomach to clean out food. And I don't think having chunks of food within the paint is necessarily beautiful." [37] She emphasizes the extensive planning required, admitting she "wasn't even sure if it was physically possible" [37].

The original performance lasts about two hours and must be incredibly painful. Rather than viewing her as the 'predator' or an 'evil element, one could see her as someone sacrificing herself for the final product, raising questions about how far a change agent should push themselves and others. In an interview with *The Guardian*, she reveals that she developed migraines and even a fear of milk, unable to touch a box of it afterward, and discusses the lasting impact of the show on her well-being:

"Brown has told me that quite a bit of fluid stays in her after each performance. So does she end up creating further works of art in the toilet? She laughs. 'Actually yes,' she says. 'That's more of a private performance for myself'."[37]

Reflection and Discussion Afterwards

After showing the video, I connect it to real-world contexts by asking, "How does this video and your experience of it relate to the real world of your business practice?" I offer below a synopsis of my students' responses to this question, including any additional concepts I may add in the discussions:

1. To push people out of their comfort zone, equilibrium must be disrupted[22,39]. (Here, I introduce the concept of system equilibrium, and the comfort-zone model[40,41].)
2. To disturb the equilibrium, you need to give energy into the system (which I do by showing the video). The challenge here is psychophysics[42,43]: too much energy versus too little. What is the minimum viable change that will stimulate a response?
3. When a change agent (in my case, an authority figure in the role of a lecturer) disrupts the equilibrium, the one creating discomfort may be rejected, eroding, thereby the leader-member relationship. This creates a paradox for the change agent: you need to disrupt to achieve change but, at the same time, this disruption may create conflict and prevent change.
4. How long can a change last before people collapse, or before the relationship with the change agent is damaged? (The video I show runs a little more than five minutes. The original version lasts 20 minutes, the performance even longer). A change process that takes too long will drain the organization. A process that is too short might not provide enough time for people to process the change. (Here, I also introduce the adaptation-to-change/change curve[44]).
5. During a change process, you will lose people because they cannot withstand the stress — the 'energy' you put into the system. Change agents should be aware of this and take measures to support people. (Handing out vomit bags might be a drastic analogy, but one I sometimes make). Identify key roles in the organization and offer coaching to help those in them to handle the stress of change. Try to gauge how the majority of people (those who appear unaffected initially) feel: if the change agent 'loses' them, a majority of the affected people will be lost in the process.

To reinforce the learning experience, I play *The Flower Duet* at the beginning of a subsequent session. This simple auditory trigger reminds students of their initial discomfort, illustrating how organizational experiences can linger and develop into lasting anxieties. This exercise demonstrates the impact of seemingly minor cues in triggering broader responses, much as past organizational changes can shape future reactions in those who were affected by them.

Acknowledgements

BIOGRAPHY

Juergen Radel holds an M.A. in economic pedagogy, economic history, and psychology from RWTH Aachen and a PhD from the University of Bremen. He began his career in a global, family-owned business. After an international assignment he served as authorized representative (Prokurist) at a global logistics provider, overseeing HR strategy and leadership development across 20 countries. He has worked with organizations such as Daimler, SAP, Google, EY, and Siemens and many more. Radel combines practical experience with theoretical insights, drawing on training from INSEAD, LBS, IMD, Tavistock Institute, and NTL. Since 2014, he joined HTW Berlin, a leading German business school, as full time tenured Professor of Management, focusing on Change-Management and Leadership. His work bridges business practice, academic theory, and executive coaching across global contexts.

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