



Oppression, Art and Aesthetics

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Guest Editors' Introduction

Oppression, Art and Aesthetics

Samantha Warren & Alf Rehn

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In a situation where the miserable reality can only be changed through radical political praxis, the concern with aesthetics demands justification... (Marcuse 1979, 1)

Marcuse's words neatly encapsulate the aim of this special issue—what does art (and aesthetics) have to do with management and organization? Why, when capitalism still grows fat on the fruits of child labor, and squeezes its profits from the sweatshop, for example, are we concerning ourselves with frivolities such as art and aesthetics? In an age which is claimed to be characterized by an increasing aestheticization and where aesthetics are being heralded as prime arbiters of economic value and social worth (Featherstone 1991; Postrel 2003) the questioning of this process is of the utmost importance to a range of business disciplines. We started to open this debate with a fascinating and diverse track held in September 2004 in Paris at the Second Art of Management Conference. The papers that appear in this special issue build upon and/or were inspired by the conversations that began there.

From the outset, we wish to make clear that we are certainly not denying that the birth of organizational aesthetics in the early 1990s crystallized a growing and welcome recognition that processes of human sense-making, organizing and managing at work are far more sensuous, embodied, passionate, and “aesthetico-intuitive” (Gagliardi 1996, 576) than traditional modernist organizational discourses had tried to make out, and these issues are undoubtedly (still) ripe for exploration. Indeed, to this end, we have seen several journal special issues (*Consumption, Markets and Culture* 5 (1) 2002; *Human Relations* 55 (7) 2002; *Organization* 3 (2) 1996), monographs (Guillet de Monthoux 2004; Strati 1999), edited collections (Carr and Hancock 2003; Linstead and Höpfl 2000), conference streams and even a conference itself (*Art of Management*)—all of which have indisputably enriched our understanding of art, aesthetics, and work.

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Yet, within this hallelujah chorus, it is worryingly hard to make out the critical voice that started the whole aesthetic movement in management and organization studies in the first place. Have things gone a bit too far? Has aesthetics, this promised space of freedom, already co-opted?

While there is much of analytic interest to be had from an aesthetic perspective on management and organization, the dark side of the notional field “Art and Management” is not insignificant. Theatre can be used as a mode of controlling organizational actors, art may be used as a way to mollify political demands, style used as an offensive weapon—in corporate life we can find a number of ways in which art and aesthetic moves are used not to enhance organizational experience but to establish hegemony. The romantic notion of art as a panacea is of course a fallacy, but one we buy into far too easily. For instance, the official art of Nazi Germany, Soviet socialist realism, and the celebratory aesthetics of almost any dictatorship shows us how art can be used in an oppressive fashion. Still, the modern versions of this—corporations sponsoring “suitable” art, the omnipresent portraits of great men in company boardrooms, art used as symbolic capital in company presentations—has strangely enough escaped our attention, for the most part. Art, in our society, is still often seen as being objectively good—a dangerous conflation of ethics and aesthetics (see Warren and Rehn 2006).

In a world defined by consumption, the place of aesthetics and art is obviously a case of something far more complex than mere decoration. Yet, in the economic sphere their place has continuously been studied and discursively constructed as something positive and creative. Such uncritical acceptance clearly limits the potential of these issues to present a more complex and serious engagement with the aestheticized world, and such a myopic view of art and aesthetics leaves a lot of things about organization, consumption, markets, and culture unsaid. Furthermore, what does this blind spot say about business and management studies more broadly? For example, are we in danger of aestheticizing our own practices? Multimedia teaching experiences, brimful with animation, video, image, and sound are becoming increasingly commonplace in the design and delivery of higher education courses—the ubiquitous PowerPoint presentation enabling slick styling and televisual feasts. In research too, sensual research methods that center on the aesthetic dimension of research participants—such as photography and visual art (Taylor 2002; Warren 2002, 2005) are gaining increasing legitimacy and demanding attention from business and management disciplines as diverse as economics, finance, marketing, and human resource management. Clearly there is a need to interrogate our own aesthetic practices to question why these shifts are occurring—what is actually being added here? Are we too guilty of celebrating style over substance?

So, in this exploratory vein, the papers in this issue inquire in various ways into the implications of a celebratory perspective on the integration of the arts, aesthetics, and management and, indeed, question the critical too—critiquing the critique. We begin the issue just there, with a sharp reminder from Jonathan Schroeder, who brings a marketing perspective to bear on these issues. Through a case study of who may be the most commercially successful artist of all time—Thomas Kinkade, “The Painter of Light™”—he problematizes organization and management theorists’ disregard for a

reality that artists have always been acutely aware of, namely the commercial potential of their work. He wryly observes that for centuries artists have been producing saleable, profitable pieces that people will want to buy. In drawing our attention to this fact, he suggests that the current colonization of the aesthetic domain by those who control and manage organizations is probably a case of new wine in old bottles, and we should not forget this in our analyses of them. In a similar vein, Timon Beyes and Chris Steyaert reflect on the now well-established interest in organization and theatre, looking at and for justifications of theatre in organizational life. They note that this literature tends toward two clumps—those that celebrate theatre as an instrument to improve business performance and those that resist such claims, preferring a critical focus on drama as a discourse of managerial control. In recognizing this, they suggest an alternative framing of the issue as “post-dramatic”—theatre as “carnavalesque”—in order to, as they put it, mess up the matter of organizational theatre to better recognize its complexity. Having given ourselves a good pinch lest we forget that the critical should not become the new mainstream, Alan Bradshaw, Pierre McDonagh, and David Marshall bring an empirical perspective to bear in the form of music. They present interview data from musicians who speak of alienation from, but also connection to their art in a commercial context, and how this seeming paradoxical state is balanced by the individuals involved in order to construct and understand their careers and artistic selves. Once again, we see that the dichotomy between the oppressed/and the not-oppressed appears too simple. Staying with empirics, Nanette Monin and Janet Sayers discuss a remarkable development in the commoditization of aesthetic value: the “Art Bonus Points” system in New Zealand. If property developers spend 1 percent of their total construction costs on works of art they receive 5 percent more space in which to erect their buildings. As this is normally in a vertical direction, art is quite literally exchanged for air, and these bonus points are also tradable, a true aesthetic economy (cf. Böhme 2003)! Whilst these paintings, sculptures, and other objects are required to be accessible to the general public, as Monin and Sayers explain, the prestige and function of the buildings they are displayed within create an environment which people do not feel comfortable in. Furthermore, there is the consequence that only “appropriate” art is likely to be commissioned—in effect a double whammy: the commercial oppression of art working in concert with art oppressing its audience. In their article on the multiple receptions and repetition of the Bauhaus, Christina Volkmann, and Christian de Cock note another similar dynamic—how the continuous recasting of Bauhaus for specific ideological uses shows the dangers of turning the aesthetic “usable.” The consumption of the Bauhaus ideas and ideals has in this analysis created a history of reception that has both made it infinitively more “popular” and at the same time almost completely stripped away its original humanistic intent. This repression of a style can here stand as a case of art being oppressed by art, standing as an important reminder that the aesthetic is in a state of constant play.

Continuing on, by using a piece of art to analyze an example of excessive organizational opulence, Ann Rippin shows us how Baudelaire’s poem “L’Invitation au voyage” highlighted, for her, how aesthetics can be used to deny employees emotional catharsis over the effects of historical organizational action—in this case,

redundancies. In an exquisite piece, Ripplin highlights a case where staff were unable to grieve over their treatment, their loss smothered by a gaily colored patchwork quilt of organizational kitsch—oppression through beauty. Staying with poetry for a while longer, this time in the form of *Blue Lyrics*, Pierre Guillet de Monthoux offers us a short interlude—which we think we shall leave to speak for itself—before the theme of beauty and order is taken up by Jaana Parviainen and Niina Koivunen in their unusual analysis of symmetry—an ancient aesthetic principle—and its effects on the representation of organizational life. They argue that the symmetrical construction of organization charts and diagrams presents a well ordered and neatly regulated picture of business activity which, once again, tries to hide the reality that all may not be so controllable, controlled or controlling in organizational life. Finally, we end with a tale of the aesthetics of space from Jan Betts. Her focus on the boardroom as an aesthetic space of organizational oppression reiterates many of the themes that have been explored here— aesthetics act as a tool for political order before they are agents of beautification and bringers of joy. The feel of a place, the emotions stirred in us by certain arrangements of activities and things at work, the values and ideals signified by the design, display, and consumption of art and art objects in an organizational setting shape our behaviors through subtle and interpretive matrices that do not stand apart from ethics, morality, power, ideology, or any other variant of micro-political organizational life. This, in the parlance of modern management, can stand as our “take home point.”

One final point. In a quasi-ironic attempt to help our contributors feel some sense of their subject matter we have deliberately oppressed their art—requiring them to express their arguments in only a (relatively!) few words, curtailing their own aesthetic expression in the process and getting them out of their textual comfort zone. For what is editing but oppression anyway?

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