

'Show Me How it Feels to Work Here': Using Photography to Research Organizational Aesthetics

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abstract

In this paper I discuss the potential role and utility of photographs in exploring the aesthetic dimension of processes of organizing. Beginning with a review of the growing significance within organization and management studies literature of the so-called 'non-rational' elements of human-being at work, I question why these issues appear to have become subjects worthy of specific scholarly attention at the turn of the century (Williams, 2001). Within this discussion, I recognise the embodied nature of organization and make links between some of the characteristics of contemporary (Western) consumer culture, and aesthetics – with particular emphasis on the context of work and organizations. Following from this, I move to consider how it might be possible to gather data about these phenomena in an organizational setting. The limitations of language as a medium of articulating aesthetic experience due to the sensory nature of these phenomena are examined as a condition which undermines the efficacy of traditional text-based research methods and I argue that these issues necessitate the employment of a more 'sensually complete' methodology – introducing the idea of photography as one step towards this end. In order to discuss the epistemological and methodological implications of this approach, I reflect on my experiences during an ethnographic study of the web-site design department of a global IT firm to suggest that photographs taken by the respondents of their work environment helped them to express the largely ineffable aesthetic experiences that resulted from the relationships they had with their physical surroundings. The photographs were used by the respondents in this research as a means of communicating their aesthetic experience during semi-structured interviews where the images served both as an 'aesthetic lens' through which to explore my research questions and as foci for discussion and reflection about those questions. Some of these photographs are displayed in this paper, juxtaposed with my narrative accounts to create what Mitchell (1994) has called an image-text. This rests on the assumption that written texts and images have relative merits as modes of dissemination in their own right, with neither taking precedence over the other in terms of authority, or claim to 'truth'.

Preface

This paper contributes to the themes of this issue in three ways. Firstly, its presentation in an earlier version at the conference at Keele University (from which the idea for this collection arose) enabled me to substantially revise and rethink some of my key arguments, and so for the comments and critical advice offered by other workshop

participants (including those whose work is featured in this volume) I am extremely grateful. I am also indebted to the anonymous referees whose supportive and constructive comments helped me to refine the final version of the paper.

Second, the theme of 'After Organization Studies' is one which unites the contributions here – and as is outlined in the editorial introduction to this issue, each paper represents this idea of 'After...' in one of many ways. In the case of this paper, I am on the one hand 'coming after' Organization Studies in the sense of contributing to the still nascent project of attending to aesthetic dimensions in processes of organizing, but on the other I am in a way 'going after' the discipline in calling for alternative methodological approaches that are perhaps better suited to researching these phenomena.

Lastly, the common thread by which these papers are pulled together seems to be a concern with rejecting or at least diminishing the dominance of dualistic modes of thinking. Correspondingly, implicit within this paper is an anti-reductionist desire, and throughout my discussions I recognise the artifice of dividing image from text or separating organizational realities from wider cultural milieu and from personal, embodied – and importantly – aesthetic lived experiences. I therefore write in the spirit of contributing to this volume's wish to deconstruct dualisms and also its commitment to what is coming 'After' what has gone before in organization studies in terms of examples of contemporary research.

Aesthetics, Society And Organization Studies¹

Lamenting the absence of emotion, the body, aesthetic and sensory experience within organizational arenas seems a standard way to begin writing about these 'non-rational' dimensions in organizations. "Writers on organizations have successfully 'written out' emotions, to the extent that it is often impossible to detect their existence" writes Stephen Fineman in the introductory section of the first edition of his landmark text on *Emotion in Organizations* (1993: 1). Similarly, Antonio Strati, writing on aesthetics in organizations, concludes that "In short, one finds in organization theory and

1 Although I make many references throughout this paper to what I consider to be the nature of aesthetic experiences (as far as there might be such a thing), for the sake of clarity I feel it would be useful to state some kind of definition from the outset. I am taking as my basis, the assumption that aesthetic experience begins with sensory perception of the material (or imagined) world and that the corresponding emotional and visceral response – mediated by what Burgin (1986) calls the 'popular pre-consciousness' of the social and cultural milieu the individual is embedded within – results in some kind of value judgement being made about that stimulus. The whole process represents an 'aesthetic experience' and although similar, is nonetheless quite distinct from either emotion, or perception, or indeed art (see Strati, 2000 for an expansion of this differentiation). Furthermore, to my mind, the act of having an aesthetic experience arises in the interplay between subject and object – and cannot be reduced to either formal properties of the object regarded aesthetically, nor to some peculiar mode of contemplation enacted by the subject. Thus 'the aesthetic' resides in the experience of apprehending as a flow between subject and object. These issues are dealt with extensively in the philosophical literature on aesthetics, for a good introduction, see Feagin and Maynard, 1997; Lyas 1997; and with regard to organization studies Linstead and Höpfl, 2000; Strati, 1999; *Organization*, 1996; *Human Relations*, 2002.

management studies the conviction that aesthetics as a discipline has nothing to do with organizational life" (1999: 4).

Whilst these statements, and others like them, undoubtedly reflect the lack of attention to the 'non-rational' within mainstream organization studies, they belie the fact that these aesthetic, emotional and visceral dimensions of human-being at work have always been part of the equation in writing about management, work and organizations. It is perhaps more accurate to suggest that they have been disregarded or ignored rather than undetected, by virtue of the fact that these facets of human existence are not conducive to study by means of scientific method, something traditionally associated with the early establishment of sociological disciplines as valid (scientific) ways of producing knowledge about the world (Gagliardi, 1996; Latour, 1986; Strati, 2001). As Williams tells us: "Emotions... together with their associated bodily themes, have their own secret history within sociology itself" (2001: 3). Classical writers such as Emile Durkheim, Karl Marx and, specifically within organization studies, Weber and Taylor have noted the importance of the emotional and somatic realm in human organization, although admittedly in a way which paints them as "the scandal of reason" (Williams, 2001: 1). Weber's ideal-type bureaucracy (1974) centred on the principle that roles should be divorced from those who perform them in order to minimise as far as possible the intrusion of individual personalities and emotion, in order to ensure equality and fairness within the organizational structure. Similarly, Frederick Taylor's (1911) method of scientific management designed out all facets of human behaviour from the execution of a task – apart from those that could be observed, classified and combined in such a way as to maximise productivity, effectively turning a human being into a passive, rational and programmable machine. Thus 'non-rationality' has always been part of thinking about organizations (using these examples at least), just that 'it' has been regarded as the undesirable or 'dark' side of working life, rather than something to be celebrated, or at the very least embraced.

It is only relatively recently, however, that organizational scholars have begun to turn attention explicitly towards these 'non-rational' aspects of organization in a way which recognises the *value* of exploring such issues in understanding contemporary work organizations (Fineman, 1993, 2000; Hochschild, 1983; Strati, 1999; Linstead and Höpfl, 2000; Hassard *et al.*, 2000). This has coincided with a similar renaissance in the social disciplines as a whole (see for example Williams, 2001; Shilling, 1993) stemming from the recognition that people at work are still human beings, with the same capacity for emotional and aesthetic experience inside the organization as they have outside it. In the context of work and organizations, as in other areas of life, we are continually surrounded by aesthetic stimuli or cues (Wasserman *et al.*, 2000) that elicit feelings, emotional responses and value judgements about our work, workplaces, colleagues and the organizations we perform. From the hermetically controlled and ergonomically designed workspaces we physically inhabit, to the logos and symbols of corporate identity and the 'branding' of corporate architecture, we are immersed in a world which bombards us with physical and ideological stimuli – stimuli which, moreover, operate on an aesthetic level. One only has to think about the branding of consumer goods and the use of symbols in wider society such as national anthems and flags to realise the emotive power that these stimuli have.

In other words, organization is an inherently embodied practice, since it is people and their bodies who *organize*. As Antonio Strati tells us of aesthetic approaches to organizations:

The underlying assumption of the aesthetic approach to the study of organizations is that, although an organization is indeed a social and collective construct... it is not an exclusively cognitive one but derives from the knowledge creating faculties of all the senses. (2000: 13)

This shift away from the notion of organizing as a rational, cognitive and entirely 'cool-headed' process has lifted the lid on a whole host of organizational phenomena traditionally not seen as the stuff of 'proper research'. In the past few years there has been an explosion of interest in issues within organizations such as sex and eroticism (Brewis and Linstead, 2000); spirituality (Bell and Taylor, 2002) and humour and fun (Collinson, 1998; Grugulis, 2002; Linstead, 1985; Warren, 2001) as well as research centring on the body, emotions and aesthetics as mentioned above. This literature is a welcome recognition of the embodied and experiential 'holistic' practice of organization, which throws into relief the incomplete assumption that organizing as a human activity is solely under the jurisdiction of the mind.

However as Williams (2001) asks, what is really interesting is the question 'why now?' Why has the 'non-rational' become a subject worthy of specific and celebratory scholarly attention at the end of the twentieth century? Williams suggests several contributory reasons for this. He describes what he sees as the dissolution of a once private emotional sphere into the public domain, in which the public display of emotion, such as that seen by the media portrayal of images of the casualties of war and famine, images of mass grieving at the death of Princess Diana in the United Kingdom and, most recently, in the aftermath of the terrorists attacks in America, become more commonplace and more acceptable. Williams also documents the rise in popularity of psychotherapy, 'new-age' beliefs and the spectacularization of emotional turmoil by soap operas and 'reality' television programmes like Big Brother, The Jerry Springer show and so on, as evidence of this 'emotionalization' of every-day life. Similarly, Bell and Taylor (2002) note that these phenomena might represent a 'quest for meaning' in a secular society where religiosity and spirituality have taken on different, more publicly expressive forms.

An alternative explanation for the contemporary interest in 'non-rational' elements of life – and in particular aesthetics – is put forward by writers on consumer culture (see for example, Baudrillard, 1998; Bauman, 1998; Campbell, 1989; Featherstone, 1991; Ritzer, 1999; Welsch, 1997). As Mike Featherstone (1991) argues, we are increasingly seeing an 'aestheticization' of everyday life as a result of the so-called post-modern turn and the centrality of consumption to contemporary Western culture. This desire to consume is perpetuated and reinforced by the manipulation of aesthetic preferences and affective responses predominantly through images – television and outdoor advertising being good examples. Moreover, this process of aestheticization has become such a taken for granted mode of being-in-the-world that all areas of life can be seen to be affected by the desire to consume, and the corresponding excitement and entertainment that consumption – and importantly the *desire* to consume – brings. As Ritzer notes:

Consumption has less and less to do with obtaining goods and services and more to do with entertainment. In fact, the means of consumption are increasingly learning from, and becoming part of, show business. (1999: 194- 95)

Ritzer argues that in all spheres of life our value judgements, preferences, tastes, choices and decisions are heavily influenced by aesthetic considerations. The value placed on the aesthetic appeal of commodities and of their commensurability with 'life-style' choices and sub-cultures in making decisions seemingly unrelated to the act of consumption itself is leading ultimately to Featherstone's "aestheticization of everyday life" (1991: 65). Ritzer cites examples of the attention paid to the design and physical appearance of not just shopping malls and leisure complexes, but of sports stadia, hospitals and schools, of municipal buildings and the increasing proliferation of sculpture and artworks in public spaces, as evidence of this process. An example from my own personal experience is the refurbishment of university buildings, superficially 'made-over' not for utilitarian reasons of maintenance but solely for the purpose of making them look more attractive to potential students in order to attract applicants to university courses. I suspect my institution is not unusual in this respect.

Importantly for my purposes here, Bauman extends these ideas to speak of an 'aestheticization of work'. His thesis is best illustrated in his own words:

Like life's other activities, work now comes first and foremost under aesthetic scrutiny. Its value is judged by its capacity to generate pleasurable experience. Work devoid of such capacity - that does not offer 'intrinsic satisfaction' - is also work devoid of value....Like everything else which may reasonably hope to become the target of desire and an object of free consumer choice, jobs must be 'interesting' - varied, exciting, allowing for adventure, contain certain (though not excessive) measures of risk, and giving occasion to ever new sensations. Jobs that are monotonous, repetitive, routine, unadventurous, allowing no initiative and promising no challenge to wits nor a chance for self-testing and self-assertion, are 'boring'. No fully fledged consumer would conceivably agree to undertake them on her or his own will, unless cast in a situation of no choice... Such jobs are devoid of aesthetic value and for that reason stand little chance of becoming vocations in a society of experience-collectors. (1998: 32-34)

Consequently, coupled with the recognition that organization is a 'fully human' process - bodies, senses, feelings and all - if we accept that aesthetic experiences are also increasing in importance in everyday life and work, the value of researching aesthetics in organizations can be seen. The issue of concern then becomes - how do we go about generating and gathering data about aesthetic experience - in the present case - in organizational research?

Researching The Aesthetic Dimension In Organizations

...the aesthetic approach...*shifts the focus of organizational analysis* from dynamics for which explanations can be given - or at least for which actor rationales can be reconstructed *a posteriori* - to dynamics more closely bound up with forms of tacit knowledge... The network of the sensory perceptive faculties of both organizational actors and organization scholars produces knowledge that is not entirely verbal, nor entirely sayable. Other languages intervene, from visual to gestural, and other knowledge-creating processes, from intuitive to evocative. (Strati, 2000: 13-14, emphases in original)

One of the ways in which Strati advocates this shift of focus is through attention to “the corporeal nature of the organizational action of persons operating in organizational settings based on the five senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch” (2001: 14). However, as a cursory glance through most methodological texts will show, there is little written about *how* we might go about this ‘sensory’ research – Antonio Strati being a notable exception. Strati goes on to call for a ‘new’ approach to studying organizations which is “based on the evocation of knowledge, on mythical thinking, and on the criterion of plausibility” (2001: 9) in order to “make it possible to conduct empathic-aesthetic analysis of organizations as social contexts, as opposed to the logico-rational and almost exclusively cognitive study of them” (*ibid.*). Research approaches he has suggested include ‘imaginary participant observation’ (1999) which involves an empathetic and imaginative engagement with the observed activities and recounted stories of the respondents as they go about and describe their organizational roles and experiences. Likewise, Pasquale Gagliardi (1996), writing on both the collection of ‘aesthetic data’ and the dissemination of findings from it, advocates the use of “allusive, poetic language” (1996: 576) to convey the richly nuanced nature of aesthetic experience. Whilst these ideas are a welcome recognition of the researcher as a source of data in their own right, and a celebration of research as an aesthetic activity in itself²: “Researchers who analyze organizational life using the aesthetic approach... must begin by arousing and refining their own sensory and perspective faculties” (Strati, 2000: 17), thus relying heavily on the intuitive and aesthetically responsive skill of the researcher in this regard, and, moreover, on the expressive capabilities of both respondents and researcher alike. Moreover, language is largely an inadequate medium through which to articulate aesthetic experiences, save for the gifted poets and novelists among us. As Suzanne Langer – speaking here about emotion – reminds us:

Everybody knows that language is a very poor medium for expressing our emotional nature. It merely names certain vaguely and crudely conceived states, but fails miserably in any attempt to convey the ever-moving patterns, the ambivalences and intricacies of inner experience, the interplay of feelings with thoughts and impressions, memories and echoes of memories, all turned into nameless, emotional stuff. (1957: 100-101)

The very fact that we have so many vague and often metaphoric words to describe states of ‘inner experience’ adds to the difficulty faced when trying to operationalize these concepts in an academic context. As scholars, we dwell in a world of words (Prosser, 1998) and are engaged (primarily) in the business of listening and talking to other human beings in order to generate written texts about the world around us – in the present case the world of human organization. Thus, to my mind, as researchers we

2 For two different but related accounts of research as an aesthetic activity see Alf Rehn (2002) and David Silverman (1997). Rehn argues for a de-emphasis on the ‘recipe book’ approach to method, that is to say the fixation on the process of thinking rather than the activity of thinking itself, thus casting research as an activity carried out according to the aesthetic preferences and sensibilities of the researcher, independently of any pre-given or post-rationalised ‘method’. Silverman on the other hand, talks of the aesthetic beauty of ordered and organized research - of clearly defined method - and calls for a ‘Wittgensteinian’ attention to the mundane in everyday life and the beauty of truth in research. Whilst he recognises that one of the drivers for undertaking particular research projects in particular ways is the aesthetic preference of the researcher, he advocates investigations be carried out by rigorous means which clearly distinguish social research from literary genres and mass-media journalism.

have quite an understandable bias towards language and texts as modes of understanding and dissemination. This is not a view I have formulated in an empirical vacuum, but one whose consequences I was faced with myself when attempting to research aesthetics in a specific organizational context. For these reasons, I was convinced that, in order to explore the relationship between the feel, sights, smells, and even the tastes of the organizational setting and the people who work there, surely a more 'sensually complete' methodology than a narrow and limiting focus on those aspects of organization which can be spoken or written down is demanded.

I feel that it is important to make the point here that I am not attempting to prescribe some kind of 'methodological recipe' for researching aesthetics in organizations. As I imagine most researchers come to realise at some point in the early stages of their careers, research methods emerge from what Vicky Singleton (2000) once called the 'methodological conversation' between theory, data and research questions, in advocating a relational approach to method which does not ignore the contingent and emergent nature of generating data. Informed by a feminist actor-network approach, she suggests that the methods by which we gather data are continually formed and re-formed depending on events within the research arena – particularly within the ethnographic tradition (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995; Pink, 2001; Coffey, 1999). 'Finished' methods, she notes, are those that appear as reified, having deleted the precarious process by which they were created – if indeed they ever stayed 'still' long enough for them to be recognised as *a* method. As Sarah Pink (2001) discusses in the introduction to her text on visual ethnography, no-one can provide a detailed 'blueprint' of how to do research, since method depends on the spatial, temporal and cultural context that the research takes place within and through. Indeed, as Alf Rehn (2002) has recently noted, a preoccupation with rigorous 'efficient' methods by which to gather data and conduct research leads to a 'moral economy of method' which "organizes research into the do-rights and do-wrongs, creating efficient divisions between orthodoxy and the great unwashed. Those who have the method-capital, the correct tools of knowledge, and those who wander, poor, in the world" (Rehn, 2002: 48). With this in mind, I write in the spirit not of unveiling yet another prescription to cure data-gathering ills, but to share some of the practices and ideas I found useful in my own 'methodological conversations' in the field.

It became apparent as soon as I began talking to my research respondents about their organizational environment that words were not enough to answer my questions. Using an ethno-methodological approach, I spent three months with the people of 'Department



X' – a web-site design department of a global IT company. The site that this research was carried out at was located in a rural location in the South of England, and the members of the Department had recently undergone an office move to new 'aesthetically designed' premises which the management hoped would communicate the creative talent of the team to potential customers, and provide a creative environment for the staff to work within – thus increasing innovative output and



ultimately productivity. I selected Department X as a research site in order to carry out a project to explore the interplays between consumption, aesthetics and organization, because I see it as an example of the 'aestheticization of work' that I describe above. The company itself is one with a reputation for corporate professionalism, sincerity and seriousness – values symbolically projected through their corporate architecture and image. Thus Department X seemed to be a radical departure from the company's normal strategic behaviour and perhaps indicated an interesting shift in corporate values – potentially lending support for Bauman's (1998) thesis that work is increasingly being judged on aesthetic criteria. Whilst I was intrigued with what I saw as a strong contrast between Department X and the rest of the company (in particular the site it was located at), my empirical research interests lay in the experiences and feelings of

people working in such an environment. How did they feel about working in such an aesthetically appealing environment – if indeed it did appeal to them? Was it enjoyable? Did they feel more creative? Was their attachment to their organization enhanced, unchanged, or diminished? These were some of the many exploratory questions I began my research armed with.

During the first few days and weeks at Department X, I engaged in many informal conversations during which the respondents wanted to show me the objects, places and spaces they were talking about. Even during the more formal interviews I was often invited to come and 'see for myself' because it was easier than explaining. It was at about this time that I decided to use photography as a research method – at this stage as a way of capturing 'visual fieldnotes' in a documentary sense about the material things that were of such importance (both positively and negatively) to the respondents. I began by taking these photographs myself, but became increasingly aware that it was largely my own judgement and aesthetic preferences which were quite literally framing these images. Although a realistic understanding of research recognises that methods are often chosen and research carried out according to the agenda and preferences of the researcher (Robson, 1993), I questioned the usefulness of imposing my interpretation on the data I was generating in terms of selecting what was and was not significant in the physical environment of Department X myself. I also discounted the so-called 'objective' approach to photography in the field in which random co-ordinates are generated from which to take photographs in order to generate a 'visually representative sample' of the subject matter (Wagner, 1979). I wasn't concerned with trying to represent the department in any objective sense, rather to gain an insight into the subjective, aesthetically experienced understandings of the environment from the respondents' perspective. It was then when I hit upon the idea of handing the camera to

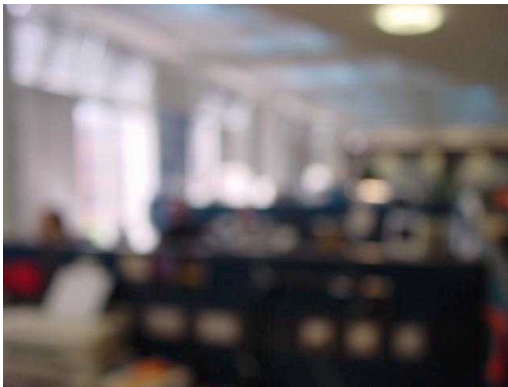
the respondents themselves as a method of capturing this data. This proved to be wonderfully successful. The respondents themselves enjoyed using the camera and I enjoyed the novelty of researching in this way. The brief I gave them was to take a set of photographs (with the digital camera I provided) that the respondents felt represented their work environment to them – hence the title of this paper and the following section – ‘Show Me How it Feels to Work Here’. These photographs were later viewed and discussed in the context of an interview conversation between the respondent and me. The photographs make an interesting data set in their own right regarding the ways in which the respondents chose to define their work environment, what they felt to be worthy (and not worthy) of photographing, and the individual and sometimes innovative ways they framed their subjects. These issues were discussed with the respondents during the interviews and many people did recognise personal ‘aesthetic’ influences on the composition of their photographs – for instance a concern for symmetry within the frame, or preference for particular colours – but rather than being problematic, this served to facilitate the respondents’ reflections on their aesthetic experiences of the environment they photographed and added to the richness of the data gathered, since what was of concern to me was the valuable dimension that the camera added to the respondents’ expression of their aesthetic experiences. This came about in two main ways. Firstly, the photographs added to the verbal data through their imagery (I am deliberately avoiding describing this imagery as purely visual, for reasons I explain below), and secondly, the photographs served as a ‘focus’ for the interview conversations, meaning that it was to some extent the respondent’s agenda that was structuring the interview since they had chosen which photographs to take and show me. I will deal with each of these themes in turn.

Show Me How it Feels to Work Here



The above photographs were taken to represent to me the sense of community that these particular people felt. The concept of community for these respondents was a largely intangible but nonetheless very significant element of their working life. Respondents spoke with obvious pride, pleasure and even love about their colleagues, their shared history and the work they produced – descriptions which were saturated with aesthetic experiences and emotionally laden. The photograph of the cookie bags (above left), and

other similar images were captured to represent social rituals – something important in the maintenance of group cohesiveness and friendship amongst this particular group of respondents. And yet, many respondents felt that the community spirit of the team was diminished compared to when they had been located in what most people would consider to be a really unpleasant office with no windows in the basement of the building, despite the apparent beauty of the office they now inhabited. Similarly, the photograph below was taken by another respondent to convey his aesthetic experience of community life at work. His explanation of its significance I have included alongside.



“...what I’m trying to capture here is colour and busy-ness without detail. I’m both interested in detail and I think I’ve got some detailed shots in here of things but I’m also fascinated by the big picture and the big impression and that’s the more emotional level sort of thing for me. That when I arrive in the morning, that’s almost the view I see but I don’t particularly look at any details, its just the busy-ness and the colour and its kind of an atmospheric thing”.

I mentioned above that I was keen to avoid over-emphasising the role of the visual (or more accurately, the *visible*) in the usefulness of photographs in this sort of research process. The above photograph, I hope, demonstrates that despite having no obvious representational value or meaning apart from its verbal explanation, it conveys an emotional sense of what the respondent is trying to tell me. Photographs, as I discuss later in the paper, are commonly taken at face-value. Their iconography is assumed to be a statement of proof about that which is pictured within the frame. Although nothing more (in a material sense) than an amalgamation of chemicals and light sensitive paper, (or, in the present case, millions of bits of digital data systematically organized into pixels to recreate an image) photographs are routinely presented as if they were themselves the object or subject photographed – for example, photographs are almost always accompanied by a verbal description in the present tense such as, “this is me on holiday” or “these are my children”. This illusion of reality is generated by photographs in a way that other forms of visual art such as painting do not. As Victor Burgin (1986) notes, when apprehended with a painting, one can see the brush-strokes and the thickness and texture of the paint. Its materiality reminds us that it is not real, but an artistic interpretation of what the artist saw and felt. A photograph is created by exposing the ‘canvas’ to reflected light, in some sense similar to the physiology of the human eye (although, as I note below, it is vital to recognise that this is where this similarity firmly ends). Indeed photography literally means ‘drawing with light’ (*ibid.*: 67) and its flat surface and striking resemblance to our own visual capabilities adds to this illusory capacity. Furthermore, so strong is the presumed relationship between the photograph and reality, that what results is an over-emphasis on the *visible*, observable features of photographs rather than their capacity to help *visualise* the *invisible*. With particular regard to the present discussion – the intangible and largely ineffable experiences of the photographer.

The following photographs are perhaps a better example of this since they were taken to communicate overtly sensory stimuli, namely smell and sound:



They were taken by two different respondents who had physically gone outside with the camera to represent to me how much they valued the fresh air and (with reference to the photograph on the left) the sound of birdsong as freedom from the confines of the office. As I have noted, the organization was located in a rural area and this was something greatly appreciated by the respondents in an aesthetic sense. Indeed, although the intention of this paper is not to discuss the findings that are emerging from the project from which these images are drawn, it is of note here that the 'pictorial representation' of freedom was a recurrent theme in the photographs the respondents

took. This photograph (to the left of this text) was taken to symbolise the pleasure that its photographer felt at being outside in 'nature' with all its unpredictability and chaos which was in stark contrast to the order and structure she saw within her organization.



Not all the photographs taken were to represent 'positive' aesthetic experiences. The photographs below were taken and used by two respondents to talk about 'oppression' and 'control' by the management of the department and its stark contrast to the freedom that the aestheticized work environment had been expected to provide:



Seeing is Believing? Images, Texts and Image-Texts

It is perhaps reasonable to argue that intangible concepts such as 'freedom' 'community' and 'oppression' could be more or less successfully communicated without the need to use photographs. Indeed I agree that the photographs I have chosen to display here certainly do not represent a mode of communication that opens directly onto the richness of aesthetic experience in all its 'authenticity', neither do I wish to suggest that aesthetics can be entirely 'captured' in a visible form. To do this would merely affirm the dichotomy between language and image and assume a rather essentialist notion of both images and aesthetic experience. However, I do believe that these images (and the many others like them) *help* in the communication of these aesthetic experiences. I have already mentioned the ideas of Suzanne Langer (1957) on the inadequacy of language to communicate emotional and aesthetic experiences, and she goes further to call for an alternative language of aesthetic articulation, a language which is not reductionist, but inclusive – one which tries to capture the 'gestalt' of aesthetic experience, the simultaneity of sensory, visceral *and* cognitive experience – what she calls the 'presentational symbolism' of aesthetic experience. To separate out each of these feelings, thoughts and sensations in order to fit them within the syntactical confines of written or spoken language "requires us to string out our ideas even though their objects rest one within another; as pieces of clothing that are actually worn one over the other have to be strung side by side on a clothesline" (Langer, 1957: 81). Thus surely the more senses that are employed in the communication of aesthetic experience the better, hence my decision to overtly involve what the respondents could see in and around their workplace. Moreover, it is not just the eyes that 'see' the image pictured in the photograph. As I stress above, imagery is as much about *image*-ination and *visualisation* as it is about visible representation. When we look at something we do not just experience it with our eyes, rather its apprehension conjures up a whole host of thoughts and feelings based on our own experiences of what that image means to us within our own personal, social and cultural worlds. As Victor Burgin explains:

Regardless of how much we strain to maintain a 'disinterested' aesthetic mode of apprehension, an appreciation of the 'purely visual', when we look at an image it is instantly and irreversibly integrated and collated with the intricate psychic network of our knowledge. (1986: 64)

This network of knowledge he calls the 'popular pre-conscious', the shared, inter-subjective, and taken for granted assumptions that enable society to function. Following Horowitz, he describes how thought and knowledge are evoked by physical and visceral action, imagery and lexicography, and stresses the homogeneity of these elements. In particular, he draws our attention to the point that photography can never be a purely visual medium. Apart from the fact that photographs are rarely seen uncaptioned or completely isolated from words, the linguistic means by which thought (and memory) is formed is inextricably entwined with the act of seeing, as he eloquently reminds us:

...in memory, in association, snatches of words and images continually intermingle and exchange one for the other... what I "have in mind" is better expressed in the image of transparent coloured inks which have been poured onto the surface of the water in a glass container: as the inks spread and sink their boundaries and relations are in constant alternation, and areas which at one moment are distinct from one another may, at the next, overlap. (Burgin, 1986: 51-52)

Thus, seeing is much more than a physiological retinal imprint – not least because of the compensation the human brain makes for the inverted, double image that light reflected onto the retina provides. We also make adjustments for the 'known' distances, perspectives and relevances between things – necessarily involving language as the medium of thought, retrieval from memory and attribution of knowledge. Thus language (text) and image (photograph) are not separate in the lived experience of seeing – or I would argue of reading or thinking or speaking – or indeed any 'textual' activity which uses language as its organizing principle.

Here I also need to be clear that I am not suggesting that images have some kind of claim to be evidence or 'proof' to back up the claims made in texts. Indeed the debate over the authority of images is a central theme in the visual research literature, (see for example Chaplin, 1994; Harper, 1998; Pink, 2001; Wagner, 1979) stemming, in part at least, from the use of photographs in early anthropological studies such as the oft-quoted example of Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead's (1942) photographic study of Balinese culture. In this, and similar studies it was assumed that photographs could document and provide 'realist proof' of what life was like in other cultures in a way that words could not (Pink, 2001). As Douglas Harper explains: "In the realist tale, the anthropologist observes objectively and interprets according to anthropological theory. The points of view of the subjects are offered in quotes separated from the rest of the text, maintaining the control of the voice of the author" (1998: 26-27). The role of images in the 'realist tale' then is to continue this project of authority by claiming to show a reality 'untainted' by the researcher's interpretation. The photograph stands as proof. However, as I have already noted, photographs are only a partial, fragmented and contextually bound version of reality. The choice of what to photograph and how to place it within the frame are inextricably bound up with the visual culture of the photographer and his or her intentions and motives. Therefore, as Sarah Pink (2001: 50) stresses, it is important to take account of the "visual culture of the field" when using photography in research. In the present case, many of the respondents in this study were either graphic designers or described themselves as 'creatives' in some way and so it is perhaps unsurprising that they should use the medium of photography in a creative and expressive way, since this is how they have been trained to 'use' images. Moreover, one could argue that their artistic predispositions have determined how they framed and

chose their subjects to photograph.³ Following Burgin's ideas that I have already outlined, Clive Scott (1999) further alerts us to this point in the introduction to his text on photography and language by reminding us that photography and the human eye are completely different despite the cultural pervasiveness (in the developed West at least) of the belief in photographs as realist proof: "the eye/camera analogy – which proposes that the retina is exactly like a photographic plate – is flawed because the retinal image is no more than the raw material of human perception; human perception is an active, ocular engagement in an environment over time" (Scott, 1999: 9). In other words, the photograph probably reveals more about the life-world of the photographer than those of the subjects he or she photographs. Of course, this is an advantage when asking respondents to make their own photographs since the photographs may quite literally act as a lens through which to explore these life-worlds. But my point here remains: that photographs cannot tell a realist tale of 'how it was' since 'how it was' will differ depending on who is using the camera, where, when and for what purpose. Their use as narrative or descriptive method therefore, needs to be carefully and explicitly informed by recognising this. However, photographs do "hold a visual trace of a reality the camera was pointed at" (Harper, 1998: 29), and so, in my opinion, they are potentially valuable in the descriptive process both during research and in the dissemination of that research. Elizabeth Edwards (1997) has suggested one way that it might be possible to reduce the authority of photographs as 'truth', namely to juxtapose so-called 'representational' images with others that are more 'expressive' in nature – such as the blurred image of the office I have pictured above. Edwards (1997) argues that there are essentially two main types of photography – that which is artistically motivated and



intended to express the aesthetic emotions of the photographer, and that which is representationally motivated and intended to bear some relation to the reality of its subject matter. By displaying the two types of image in relation to one another in some way, Edwards suggests that the 'authority' of the realist image is diminished, or destabilised (Emmison and Smith, 2000) through the representation of the same subject matter from a different perspective and the more realist image at the same time provides a more 'factual' context for its expressive counterpart, as in the images of the pool table at Department X I have displayed here.

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- 3 It is interesting to note that although the photographs taken by the graphic designers were indeed more 'aesthetically appealing' and 'creative' in terms of their composition, this was not exclusively so. Staff with less creative jobs, such as technical and clerical support staff also used the camera in expressive ways and some of the 'creative' staff took photographs much more akin to casual snapshots. Whilst it is no doubt important to recognise these influences on the subjects, composition and framing of the photographs for reasons of contextualization, I do not believe that it is worthwhile to look for causal relationships between personal characteristics and the way the respondents chose to take their photographs. No doubt one could look at the set of photographs generated by this project and find correlations between gender, age, social and cultural background and any number of other variables and 'types' of photograph. To do so would only be fruitful if one were intending to generalise these findings to a wider population, and even then the classification of photographs and respondents into the afore-mentioned categories is, in my opinion, problematic given the arbitrary nature of drawing boundaries.

The question then, is how best to combine different kinds of images and text to achieve a symbiotic effect without unduly privileging one over the other. In the anthropologist's 'realist tale' images are assumed to have greater authority than the words of the anthropologist in the text. However, images are also extensively used as 'mere illustrations' of the written word, (such as in the case of children's story books) placing them as subordinate and arguably superfluous to text. Mitchell (1994) has attempted to theorise the issues connected with the authority of images and text in an interesting debate, which suggests that, rather than placing image and text in a hierarchical relationship (of whichever order), pictures and text should be seen as being beyond comparison – each offering a valuable contribution to the creation and communication of meaning, which is different from, but no better or worse, than the other. He conceptualises three different kinds of relationships between images and texts: the first being 'image/text' where *either* images *or* text are used as the narrative mode, a dualistic conceptualisation that privileges one over the other. At the other end of the scale is Mitchell's 'imagetext' within which images and text are synthesised into a whole, as Sarah Pink notes (2001: 127) "to emphasise the ambiguity of visual meanings, giving viewers/readers greater scope self-consciously to develop their own interpretations of photographs" (and, I would add, of text). Whilst this may be a worthwhile academic exercise in bringing the ambiguity of meaning to the fore of both image and text, as a method of communicating an intended meaning, I would argue that such 'imagetexts' are often confusing and frustrating for the reader/viewer. However, Mitchell goes on to suggest a third way of thinking about images and texts, that of the 'image-text' where words and pictures are juxtaposed without either being reduced to or being placed as superior over the other. These kinds of narratives are perhaps better known as 'montages' which Marcus (1995) has described as photographs which are juxtaposed with text about the context, the researcher's chosen theoretical framework, the intentions of and stories about the photographer and his or her subjects and so on, to "[create] printed ethnographic representations that do not privilege the 'truth' of written academic text over other representations of knowledge. Such text would imply no hierarchy of ethnographic value between photographs and words, nor hierarchies within these categories" (Pink, 2001: 130).

Following these ideas, I have constructed this paper as an image-text – neither my words or the images would be adequate alone, and yet together they create a synergy which perhaps might be seen as a move toward Langer's (1957) goal of presentational symbolism. This idea of image-text is not only relevant to a discussion of dissemination however. During the research process it became immediately obvious that the photographs the respondents took needed explanation to me – to a greater or lesser degree – before I could understand the significance of what they represented to the respondents. By way of a further visual explanation, below are some of the more 'obscure' images that were captured:



Thus during the research process itself, the images were contextualized through conversation centring on them, while at the same time they helped with the *image*-ination of the respondents' verbal descriptions of their organizational experiences. The ambiguity of the images in isolation brings me to my discussion of the second way in which I found photography so useful in my research, as I mention earlier in the paper – their role in stimulating social interaction in an interview context.

Talking Pictures

Interviewing using photographs is most commonly referred to as a technique of 'photo-elicitation' (Collier and Collier, 1986; Wagner, 1979) in which a respondent and researcher sit down together to talk about the photograph – discuss its content, what it means to the respondent, what it might remind them of, and so on. However, as both Dona Schwartz (1994) and Sarah Pink (2001) have pointed out, this description of interviewing with images assumes either that the meaning is wholly contained within the image, with the respondent being required to extract it; or that the photograph is only a prompt, eliciting comment 'contained within' the respondent. Neither of these conceptualisations is in my opinion, adequate to explain the dynamics that occurred during the conversations I had with my respondents about the photographs they had taken. As I note above, both images and words were inextricably linked in communicating to me the sensory and aesthetic nature of the experiences that were recounted during the interviews and moreover, the meanings and understandings that my conversations with the respondents generated were 'joint efforts'. Douglas Harper (1998: 35) has re-named the technique of interviewing with images, calling it a visual "model of collaboration in research" and in so doing, he recasts the situation as one where meaning is actively created in the interaction between the researcher, respondent and the image, rather than passively residing in either one or the others. Rob Walker and Janine Weidel (1985) use the term 'the can-opener effect' to further describe the dynamics at work here. They explain how images can prompt the respondent to view and reflect on what is pictured in the photograph from a variety of perspectives in discussion with the researcher. As they note: "photographs can speed rapport, involve people in the research and release anecdotes and recollections, so accelerating the sometimes lengthy process of building fieldwork relationships" (Walker and Wiedel, 1985: 213). In this present case, involvement and collaboration was enhanced by the

respondent having taken the photographs themselves. It was also interesting that almost all the respondents chose to operate the laptop computer that we viewed the digital images on, further reinforcing my view that they felt more of a sense of ownership of the interview agenda than would otherwise have been the case and, moreover, that they felt that the images were theirs to control. Perhaps one of the most lucid accounts of the practice of interviewing with images is recounted by Dona Schwartz, reflecting here on her use of photography to research social change in a once prosperous and now declining US legion-post:

Taking an attributional approach to the viewing process, informants respond with extended narratives and supply interpretations of the images, drawing from and reflecting their experiences in the community. The photographs themselves provide concrete points of reference as interviews proceed. Depictions of specific locales, events, and activities function as prompts which elicit detailed discussions of the significances of things represented. Because photographs trigger multiple meanings dependent on the experiences of viewers, what is considered significant may take the ethnographer by surprise, leading to unexpected revelations. (1994: 143)

Furthermore, using the respondents' photographs as a starting point for discussing their feelings toward their organization, and in particular their aesthetic experiences, felt like a very natural process. I have already noted that making a distinction between language and image in lived experience is to some extent artificial – indeed, as Sarah Pink notes, “conversation is filled with verbal references to images and icons. People use verbal description to visualise particular moralities, activities and versions of social order (and disorder)” (2001: 71). Introducing photographic depictions of objects, events, places and people into the interview situation from this stance becomes nothing more than making this process of visualisation more explicit.

However, there are issues thrown up by such a collaborative approach to research which are perhaps less apparent when using traditional qualitative research methods such as interviewing, or observation. One of the most significant of these is undoubtedly the question of ethics, for the very act of holding a camera up to one's eye and pointing it at someone is an obvious and potentially intrusive activity which cannot be 'disguised' in the same way as making field-notes in a journal or even tape-recording an interview. I am not suggesting that these research methods are without ethical dimensions, nor that researchers who use them (as indeed I do) do so in any way unethically – far from it! – but what I am saying is that using a camera and making photographic representations of people, things, places and events makes ethical issues of anonymity, privacy, ownership and even copyright far more 'visible' than is often the case with 'word-based' research (Prosser n.d.). From a moral perspective, permission has to be granted by a person before you can take their photograph in a way that jotting down their comments in a notebook may not. Furthermore, as Sarah Pink (2001) tells us, who actually owns a photographic image is open to question, meaning that issues of copyright and permission become even more complex. Photography, when considered to be an artistic medium, generally comes under copyright law as this explanation from the Design and Artists Copyright Society tells us:

Copyright is a right granted to creators under law. Copyright in all artistic works is established from the moment of creation – the only qualification required is that the work must be original. There is no registration system in the UK; copyright comes into operation automatically and lasts for the lifetime of the creator plus a period of 70 years from the end of the year in which he or she

died. After the death of the artist, copyright in his or her works is usually transferred to the artist's "heirs" or beneficiaries, who then become the copyright owners. When the 70-year period has expired, the work enters what is called the "public domain" and no longer benefits from copyright protection. (DACS n.d.)

However, if a photograph of a person is taken for commercial gain it becomes an 'effigy' and the copyright may transfer to the subject of the photograph. These issues are by no means clear, but in the case of this particular piece of research, since the respondents took the photographs themselves, technically the copyright of the images they created remains with them. With this in mind, I asked each respondent for permission to use their images in academic work, including journal articles and my PhD thesis. However, should these images be used in the publication of a book or in non-academic literature I would wish to confirm (where possible) that this permission still holds.

This preoccupation with privacy issues and the ownership of photographic 'effigies' of oneself almost certainly reflects a further aspect of the visual culture of contemporary Western society. Indeed, images are seen by many as *the* defining feature of postmodernism fuelling the obsession with aesthetics in everyday life I discuss earlier in this paper (see Mirzoeff, 1998 and Emmison and Smith, 2000 for examples specific to visual culture and research methods respectively). Just as the early anthropologists had to explain to indigenous tribes-people that the camera would not harm them, and was not a handmaiden of the devil, so I, as a modern-day organizational researcher, had to reassure my respondents and the organization to which they belonged that I would not use any photographs which would reveal distinguishing organizational features (such as logos or other trade-marks that would be instantly recognised by most people), commercially sensitive material, or the faces of the respondents. So far I have not found any of these promises hard to keep. Unless you have visited Department X, you are unlikely to be able to guess the identity of the company by looking at the photographs I have included here. Similarly, I have protected the anonymity of the (few) people that are in my photographic data-set by either blurring their faces using digital image-manipulation software, or cropping the image to obscure facial features (as in the case of the picture of people playing pool reproduced in this paper). Nonetheless, these issues remain important practical *provisos* when using photographs in research.

Other practical issues connected with image-based research are quite simply the difficulties inherent in storing and sending large volumes of digital data on the largely non-specialist computer equipment owned by most universities. Digital images (whether generated on a digital camera or 'scanned to disk' from traditional photographs) make large data-files if they are to be stored as reasonably high quality pictures. For example, the original version of this paper was approximately 6MB (almost five floppy-disks full) of data. This then makes articles and research papers almost impossible to send via e-mail and even harder to publish in printed journals (and almost never in colour). Even printing good quality hard-copies requires a high-quality expensive printer. It has (rather ironically) crossed my mind that the real reluctance to use images in organizational research comes not from theoretical or methodological uncertainty but from practical constraints such as these! As Colin Robson has pragmatically noted, research projects are often more heavily influenced by what is practical rather than what is

epistemologically desirable, referring to the process of developing a method or set of methods that is governed by the 'art of the possible' (Robson, 1993: 188).

Conclusion

As I've argued throughout this paper, researching the aesthetic experiences of people in organizations requires a different methodological approach to research which centres on more traditional subjects of organizational analysis. This is largely due to the tacit, intangible and largely ineffable nature of aesthetic experiences as elements of the so-called 'non-rational' facets of human being, as well as representing a shift away from cognitively biased 'logico-scientific' (Gagliardi, 1996) or 'objective' accounts of organization and towards empathetic and situated modes of understanding and exploration. Moreover, as research into work and aesthetics becomes more commonplace (in the same way as issues of embodiment and emotion have become), the need to develop a range of techniques with which to gather this richly nuanced and subjective data also grows in importance. As I have discussed in this paper, I do not wish to be overly prescriptive in this regard, but suggest that photography and the analysis of photographic images might be one way in which to explore research questions concerned with the aesthetic side of life in organizations. Within this suggestion, I have problematized some of the assumptions and beliefs that are commonly held about the role of images and their relative status *vis-à-vis* texts. Whilst I have not explicitly discussed the authority of text *per se* (for the sake of brevity and the reason that these issues are well documented elsewhere – see for example Czarniawska, 1999; Derrida, 1991; Foucault, 1991; Linstead, 1994) it is nevertheless important to note that epistemological issues surrounding the status of images as truth and the usefulness of their 'voices' in communicating aesthetic data are to some extent similar to those debates that continue with regard to texts and truth, particularly from the perspective of post-modern/post-structural theorists, including some of those writing within the discipline of organization studies. Finally, I have mentioned some ethical and practical implications of using photography in research – and in particular digital photography – problems which I have been faced with myself during my own research project. Notwithstanding these difficulties, as Antonio Strati notes:

The methodological issues raised by the analysis of the visual... [are] both subtle and important to the aesthetic approach. They highlight that understanding organizational life on the basis of aesthetically produced documents [eg: photographs] is a delicate and complex matter, whether they are produced by the organizational actors or whether they are an artefact created by the researcher. (2000: 27)

Therefore photography as well as other forms of visual research such as investigations of the symbolic/aesthetic power of visible spaces, places and objects in organizational settings (Gagliardi, 1990; Nathan and Doyle, 2002; Warren, 2002) either through the camera's lens or by observation *in situ* represent potentially valuable methodological approaches in the context of research into work, organizations and aesthetics. This assertion, as we have seen, is grounded in theoretical and methodological considerations, but additionally, using a camera in a research project I would argue adds

fun and novelty to the activity of 'doing research', enhancing the aesthetic dimension of research itself for all concerned.

The future of photography as a research tool however, depends in part at least on overcoming or circumventing the practical problems that come with storing and using images in electronic form. However, the growing sophistication and availability of hypermedia such as CD-ROMS and the Internet can only serve to help in this respect. Relatedly, the growing number of on-line journals such as *ephemera*, *EJROT*, and *Tamara*, as well as subscription titles that are increasingly making the transition to web-based formats as well as hard copy availability increases the publication potential of papers which contain images – given the complex and costly process of submitting such articles to solely print based journals. Perhaps these technological factors will combine to make photographic and indeed visual research more generally, an attractive option for a wider variety of organizational research projects – giving photography the exposure it deserves.

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