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AVANT GARDE ORGANIZATION

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# AESTHESIS

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# AESTHESIS: International Journal of Art and Aesthetics in Management and Organizational Life

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# AESTHETICS OF EMPTINESS

Verena Landau's *pass\_over* reflects the cold atmosphere of shareholder meetings



THE WORK OF THE PAINTER VERENA LANDAU SHEDS BOTH AN IRREVERENT AND COMPLEMENTARY PERSPECTIVE ON THE ANNUAL SHAREHOLDER MEETINGS COMMONLY DEPICTED BY COLOURFUL IMAGES OF 'SUCCESS' IN ANNUAL REPORTS AND NEWSPAPERS. LANDAU'S SIX-PIECED EDITION, *PASS\_OVER*, DEALS WITH THE PASSING OVER OF DELEGATES AT THESE EVENTS INTO EMPTY AND COLD ATMOSPHERES WHERE SPACE, TIME AND IDENTITIES SEEM TO BE ANNIHILATED. HERE WE WILL USE *PASS\_OVER* AS A LENS THROUGH WHICH TO FOCUS ON AESTHETIC 'STAGING' -- A MASK FOR OPPRESSIVE AND DEHUMANIZING ORGANIZATIONAL PRACTICE.

## Different Perspectives on Corporate Events

Aesthetics permeates all elements of society and is increasingly becoming prevalent in the business world. Scholars have come to emphasise the fact that organizational life is fundamentally 'aesthetic' in character (Burke, 1945, 1969; Mangham and Overington, 1983, 1987; Strati, 1999; Linstead and Höpfl, 2000; Carr and Hancock, 2003; Guillet de Monthoux 2004) and a broad body of intellectual inquiry has emerged on strategies of impression management in personal encounters (Goffman, 1959; Schlenker, 1980; Rosenfeld *et al.*, 1995; Clark and Salaman, 1998; Gardner and Avolio, 1998). One example of this is the large scale event of the Annual General Meeting (AGM), where top managers

appear to investors, journalists and public audiences in spotlights and in carefully designed surroundings.

In response to these attempts at impression management and other aesthetic practices of organizations, artists have used their own aesthetic means of expression for critical reflection. The painter Verena Landau for example has captured the situation of AGMs in her edition *pass\_over*. She emphasizes the significance of corporate aesthetics, as in her view it expresses disturbing trends of inhumanity and social isolation, which she exposes in her work. Landau has explained in personal interviews that she finds that – despite organizational aspirations to create a personal, warm and unique image with a range of aesthetic techniques – the atmosphere is often quite depressing, conformist and cold.

Corporations, however, spend millions to impress audiences and financial meetings account for up to 50 percent of the budget of investor relations departments in German companies (Handelsblatt, 2002: 22). A broad survey of these events found that companies choose a location that 'fits' with their business, has 'flair', and is close

to the headquarters at 'home' (Bozicevic, 2005). Efforts to exploit such situations, to build relationships and investor trust, have even been described as 'missionary work' (Gibbins *et al.*, 1990) on the corporate side, and event organizers emphasize that AGMs should create a 'special experience' with an 'a-ha effect' for the audience (Orlik and Graf, 2001: 592).

It has been acknowledged that corporate meetings provide special qualitative and interpretative insights that are not otherwise afforded by traditional means of communications (Unseem, 1998; Rogers, 2000; Altmeppen *et al.*, 2005). The special persuasive potential of personal encounters, according to research on cultural performance, arises from the 'production of presence' (Gumbrecht, 2004), a particular atmosphere that 'touches' and 'engages' people (Turner, 1982). Böhme (1993) describes the notion of 'atmosphere', which emerges from staged settings, from people, objects and surroundings, and affects the people who are present. He has extended this concept beyond its origin in the world of arts to encompass persuasive corporate settings, which are created by architects, designers and marketers.



Figure 1: Video freeze frame of Deutsche Bank AGM 2005 by courtesy Verena Landau

Even though organization researchers have already explored different aspects of 'atmospheres' and the embodied experience of shopping, leisure and cultural environments (Kotler, 1973-74; Bitner, 1992; Joy and Sherry, 2003; vom Lehn, 2006), the company AGM remains a relatively unexplored arena. One academic analysis in this arena, which draws on a theatre and performance studies perspective, has examined a range of aesthetic techniques, such as bright lights, dynamic stage designs, elevated podiums and persuasive rhetoric – all employed to *persuade* audiences (Biehl, 2007).

In terms of corporate venues, the atmosphere is created by the behaviour of the managers, the architecture of the places, and the demeanour of people present. We have a rich vocabulary of 'atmospheres' as being inviting, friendly, trustworthy – words one could use to express corporate aims in AGMs – or we may speak about encountering atmospheres of power, authority and emptiness – notions one can also use to describe Verena Landau's interpretations of AGMs. The atmosphere which emerges from these surroundings directly affects the human condition, as it is closely linked to bodily presence (Böhme, 1993), and hence affects visitors' identities. This phenomenon is also seen in a number of studies dealing with the capitalist reconstruction of public and private spaces (e.g. Lefebvre, 1991), which will be discussed later in the context of the transit *pass\_over* illustrates.

The concept of atmosphere seems particularly suitable as a key term for our study as the paintings contain a range of elements such as space, clothing, rhetoric and behaviour, and relate the overall atmosphere to people's identities. Our study of Landau's artistic work discusses intriguing details and the leitmotif of atmospheres, spaces and identities illustrated in the paintings – thereby adding to the discourse about aesthetics and the relationship between art and organizations. Landau's approach aims at deconstructing the appearances companies want to create and provides a complementary perspective to the company's intended impression. We will further explore the notion of 'aesthetic staging' as a mask for oppressive and dehumanizing organizational practices by using Landau's paintings of AGMs as a lens through which to focus on this

concept. Our discussion should function as an 'aesthetic understanding of organizational life', an 'epistemological metaphor' which problematizes the rational and analytic analysis of organizations' (Strati, 1999: 7). Artistic reflection can be seen to expose the darker, hidden recesses of the quotidian dimensions of organizational life (Burrell, 1997). It directly challenges what Hancock calls the 'romanticized ideal of the aesthetic as a space', which thinks that the space should be capable of creating an embodied experience of organizational life (2005: 39). It looks to unmask corporate attempts to generate positive meaning and atmospheres by representing the space through the eyes of the artist, who finds that spectators do not at all experience, for example, the 'Passion to Perform' that Deutsche Bank meant to convey.

Given the artist's critical preoccupation with atmospheres, one may connect this to a 'new aesthetics', which Böhme has asserted is categorically different from an aesthetics of judgement, or of beauty or the fine arts. Rather, it makes aesthetic reality transparent by conceiving it and its production of atmospheres in terms

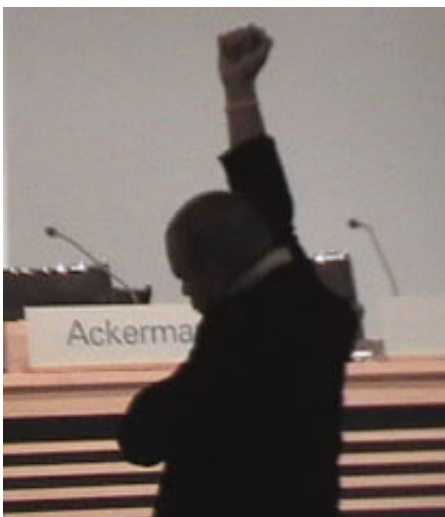


Figure 2: Video freeze frame of Deutsche Bank AGM 2005 by courtesy Verena Landau

of real social power and manipulation (1993). The edition *pass\_over*, using company events as its objects, also attacks the prejudice that arts have to be 'fine' arts, and should concentrate on 'nice' objects. It thereby suggests an organizational aesthetics which serves as a method of inquiry into more than just the beauty of structure, product

or process (Linstead and Höpfl, 2000). Landau's work exposes economic phenomena by providing a critical evaluation of corporate reality and a complementary perspective on the colourful and positive pictures of AGMs by corporate photographers that we find in annual reports, on homepages or in newspapers.

## The development of the edition

It was through the Dachverband der Kritischen Aktionäre, Germany's Critical Shareholders Association, that Landau was invited to visit some AGMs, and through whom she gained the necessary



Von dieser Hauptversammlung werden keine Bild- und Tonaufnahmen erstellt. (...) wird lediglich die Rede von Herrn Ackermann im Internet übertragen und aufgezeichnet. Ich darf auch Sie, meine Damen und Herren, bitten, keine Bild- und Tonaufnahmen zu machen!

Figure 3: Rolf-E. Breuer, Head of Supervisory Board and Chairman, Deutsche Bank: "This AGM is not filmed or photographed. (...) Only the speech by Mr Ackermann is transmitted on the Internet. I may also ask you, Ladies and Gentlemen, not to take any pictures nor to film! Video freeze frame and montage of text of Deutsche Bank AGM 2005 by courtesy of Verena Landau

accreditation permits to facilitate her entry into these events. The artist and the Shareholders Association knew of each other from a shared interest in campaigning on social and ecological issues, discrimination and the production of weapons and ammunition. The painter first collected material for documentary purposes, shown in the video freeze frames illustrated here. Landau took her digital video camera into several AGMs and openly filmed the events. Unsurprisingly, she was once told to turn off the device by security officers, as companies usually prohibit the broadcasting of the general debate, even though this violates recommendations in the Corporate Governance Codex, and is heavily criticized by media (Biehl and Fechtner, 2003), as well as by

shareholders who desire public scrutiny.

In the eyes of artists, comparable practices might in general encourage political actionism between the legal and illegal (NGBK, 2004). In an interesting contrast, academics would be far more likely to be hesitant in this situation, given the problems of covert practice and the potential violation of privacy rights (Payne, 2000; Antonacopoulou, 2002; Bell and Bryman, 2007).



Niemand - zumindest niemand, den ich kenne - will einen "Kapitalismus pur" und schon gar nicht einen Raubtierkapitalismus. Das sind Vokabeln aus der Zeit des realen Sozialismus, und wohin der geführt hat, ist ja bekannt.

Figure 4. Josef Ackermann, CEO of Deutsche Bank: "Nobody – at least no one I know – wants to have a 'pure capitalism' and not at all a Predatory Capitalism. That is a vocabulary from the time of Real Socialism, and we all know where it led to." Video freeze frame and montage of text of Deutsche Bank AGM 2005 by courtesy of Verena Landau.

Landau finally used the material for inspiration, and developed her oil paintings of the six-piece edition *pass\_over* to express criticism. The videos helped her to get a feeling for the business environment as it struck her as bizarre. She was surprised by the unemotional faces, and in several instances was amazed by the ideology manifest in the executives' rhetoric. For example, the video still of Deutsche Bank's Ackermann served to play down the fact that thousands of jobs are made redundant in the attempt to increase the return on capital. He had been publicly accused of his downsizing policy and tried to distance himself from such policies ("nobody I know...") and opened up an elevating contrast through using negative connotations suggesting socialism and its 'disastrous' effects. Landau feels that impression management strategies in the oratory were quite revealing in a negative sense, and in the collage she captures the ridiculousness of those moments and

the innocent mask which tries to play down controversial issues. Managers are perceived as cold as the surrounding, there is no space for humanity and the only values are the values of profit and money.

Landau made another artistic statement when she decided to have the edition *pass\_over* printed by Dachverband der Kritischen Aktionäre. With this cooperation Landau wants to underline her desire that art should be available for those wishing to resist the dominance of the corporation and at low cost for everybody – and not serve the (financial) regime. Landau is also critical of the economization of art by managers, who often pose in front of the paintings owned by the company. The artist became particularly aware of this after one of her own works was bought by HypoVereinsbank, the very type of company which she was attempting to critique. In accord with other reflections such as Ullrich's *Mit dem Rücken zur Kunst*' ('Backed by Art') (2004) in this problematic interplay of art and power (Berger, 1972, 1980), Landau finds problematic that paintings which should encourage critical reflection degenerate into status symbols for power, used to suggest intellectual capacities and to give moral justification for corporate agency.

Whilst corporations appropriate art for their purposes, Landau in a reciprocal action took possession of corporate aesthetics, transforming it into artistic expressions intent on developing a heightened reflectiveness. In her 2005 project *Feindbild Verleih* (*Renting Pictures of Enemies*) she created oil paintings from photos of CEOs (and politicians) and rented them out to private citizens. She approached questions such as: "What happens to paintings which are sold to companies? Do I want to sell to companies which engage in violations of human rights or production of weapons but try to embellish their image with art?" (Dachverband der Kritischen Aktionäre, 2006; Klemm *et al.*, 2005) In *pass\_over* the critical potential of art unfolds by alienating event aesthetics and putting corporate ideology into another perspective. One feels that Landau carries the negative experience of the 'taking-over' of one of her works into the pictorial space which appears anaemic – like the powerful previous 'owner-user' of her painting (Opitz, 2005).

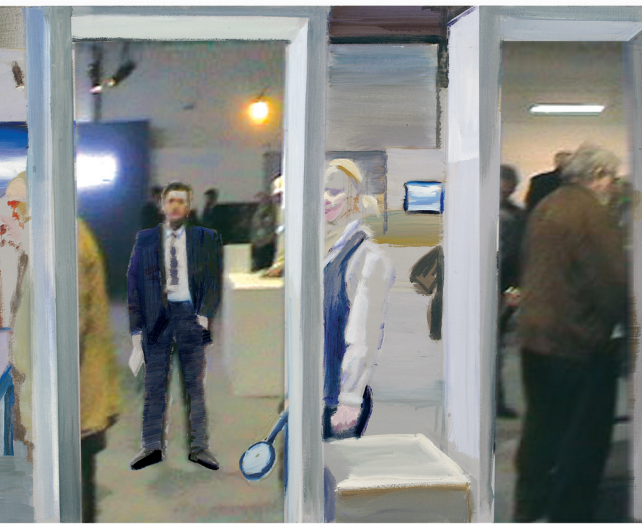
## The edition *pass\_over*

The definition of 'passing over' suggests to leave behind and overcome, and this is why the title *pass\_over* implies a gap. Landau directs her attention towards transit rooms and barriers, as they are like security checkpoints at airports and doorways to banks, lines of social segmentation and generate ritual behaviour. "A human being mutates into a deaf shareholder at the entrance to annual general meetings", the artist suggests.



Figures 5-10: Digital photomontages from the edition *pass\_over* from 2006 by courtesy Verena Landau.

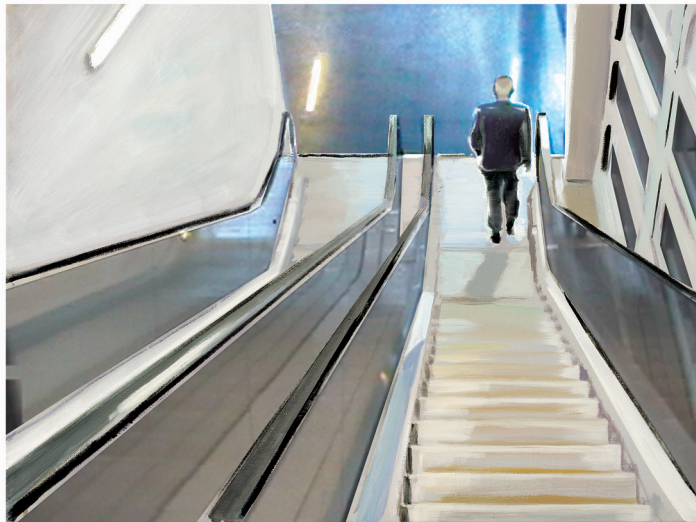
To show the lack of individuality and interchangeability Landau has populated her digital photomontages with stereotyped personalities. The people are hybrid characters, consisting of video fragments and designed bodily parts. Attentive examination reveals traces of resistance at the entrance of Deutsche's AGM: a hostess's constrained face and protesting employees mirrored by the windows. Demonstrators must not 'pass over' the line of demarcation, which is here depicted by glass doors that are transparent only on the visual level. Observers may imagine how the atmosphere changes by entering: the noise, the voices will be shut off and be replaced by the sound of large halls, where the naked walls echo the voices of managers and shareholders in the general debate. It's a legal obligation to transmit the sound and the images in every room, via speakers and TV screens which we find in other pictures of the edition as well. The 'capitalist discourse' fully fills the audible dimension and atmosphere of the events.



stockholders dress in jeans and resemble the company's hostesses wearing baseball caps and mechanics' outfits. Guests consequentially appear to be employees of the automotive company. "I think those were signs of identification", says Landau.

Deutsche Bank AGM is more straight and conventional. Landau has illustrated that similar jackets and suits recreate a banking society. All people wear name badges, which we also saw on managers in Figure 1, which although are nominally signs for individuality have a normative and categorizing function. People in leisure wear stick out.

Passing over or passing through the security gate, which functions as a limen, intensifies a feeling of liminality, a concept from anthropologist Victor Turner (1982). He worked on Arnold von Gennep's *Rites de Passage* (1960) that occur in social rituals, such as coronations and marriages, and consist of a pre-liminal phase (separation from everyday life), a liminal phase (transition), and a post-liminal phase (reincorporation). This concept can also be taken to describe economic rituals like AGMs in which shareholders in this separated spatial surroundings vote on the exoneration of directors for the past financial year. Each meeting's time is a state of 'betwixt and between' which provides special experiences. In Landau's view, participants become part of the impersonal system.



and society Landau draws on has a long history. Since long ago, architecture has been engaged in the production of atmospheres (Böhme, 1993) as castles signified the power of ruling classes and corporations nowadays use buildings as symbolic resources of power (Berg and Kreiner, 1990; Kersten and Gilardi, 2003). The aesthetic of the physical environment contributes as a normative tool to the 'ideological, political and economic structures of domination' and an anaesthetized subjectivity (Dale and Burrell, 2003: 115; Burrell, 1997).

Our study of Landau's work also needs to reflect on the fact that capitalism has constantly reconstructed relations of space (Lefebvre, 1991). Prevailing trends such as the annihilation of space and time via the acceleration of the turnover of capital – for which stock markets, investors, shares and also AGMs are paradigmatic representatives – can be seen in Landau's empty spaces.

Looking at Landau's pictures we get the idea that mimicry through uniformity does not result in positive atmospheres. The images express loneliness and emotional emptiness in large halls and on deserted staircases which lead down, illuminated by white, sterile light which doesn't relate in any way to the time and season outside. Paradoxically the huge (social) event reminds us of an 'absent society', as Tom Huhn, American philosopher and curator, who wrote about Landau's work, puts it: 'It produces the experience that society is still missing' (Visual Arts Museum, 2006). The single person on the staircase reminds us of the almost non-existent impact a private investor's voice has at an AGM and at an overarching level gives us an idea about the loneliness of men in the capitalist system. The relationship of space

One might associate the zigzag of the staircases with the shape of stock prices which are going up and down, taking people with them, leading everywhere and nowhere, as if there was no progress, no development, no sense. Gold colours remind us of financial success but these are just isolated lines which like transitory flashes of fake warmth transgress the cold, blue atmosphere.



The social machinery starts to work when shareholders, by 'passing over', become an element of the mass. "People suddenly walk erect and want to be part of the crowd", Landau observed. The immersion into the group is according to the painter sustained by a certain code of clothing, which varies from company to company. E.g. DaimlerChrysler



For Landau, the spatial configuration was more striking. She observed that stakeholders on the bottom floors at DaimlerChrysler AGM, under the dome of the ICC congress centre in Berlin, satisfied their corporate needs at the buffet and then on their own drove up on the staircases to the central hall where the top managers spoke, adopting an erect position as if they were full of expectation. The motif of driving up into something, like the sanctuary of power, has an almost religious appeal and clearly expresses power relationships between small shareholders and corporate executives.

Those venues can be conceived as abstract spaces which are demarcated against an outside and are specialized, producing identities of the people present (Lefebvre, 1991). The German urban sociologists Ronneberger, Lanz and Jahn, in their work *Die Stadt als Beute* (The City as Spoil) (1999), also critically explore the effects of corporations on (privatized) spaces rendering them 'clean' and impersonal. Space and discourse are interwoven and this motif has been taken over by theatre director René Pollesch for his play of the same name (2002), in which performers discursively express the consequences of ubiquitous ideas of managerial entrepreneurship: producing desperation and emotional emptiness, not only the city is spoil, the space is spoil, the subject is spoil, too. Art reflects organizational developments and managerial discourse finds its hollow echo not only in the paintings of Verena Landau, but also on the postdramatic stages of Pollesch's plays, for example.

Although companies say that they make efforts to find a place that fits with their mission, the artist interprets AGMs as 'non-lieux' ('non-places'), in reference to the French anthropologist Marc Augé (1992). The concept of 'non-lieu' has been developed to contrast Pierre Nora's idea of a 'memory place' (1952) which encompasses geography, historic contexts and symbolic connotations and collective memory and creates identity.

Augé coined the term non-lieux to describe specific kinds of architectural and technological spaces, designed to be passed through or consumed rather than appropriated. Those spaces retain little or no trace of peoples' engagement with them, the venues could be anywhere, and remain anonymous. Stock markets, corporations and trades are in fact anonymous, but another examination found that – to private shareholders but not to analyst meetings – CEOs frequently used metaphors of the 'roots' the company had in Germany (Biehl, 2007: 176). Those efforts can be seen as a manoeuvre to serve the so called 'home bias': people, especially private shareholders, tend to feel safer investing close to home as this is seemingly more controllable and safer (Coval and Moskowitz, 1999). Landau's paintings however reflect the view that companies, rather, create impersonal non-places; there is no notion of 'flair' and positive atmosphere, the cosiness of home is wholly absent.

The pictures show people who don't gather socially but only in groups of two or, entering into a mute technical dialogue with a brochure, walk alone. People are observed by security, spaces are controlled, directions are predetermined and limited. The lack of personality and individuality suggests that the finance and stock markets and capitalist dynamics create spaces of unspecific time and value, of emptiness and suppression – mechanistic staircases, cold blue hallways, stereotyped personalities with unemotional masks. However, small signs of resistance, a colourful outfit, a constraint face, the presence of demonstrations, show that there is still some individual life left, although

people in these rooms seem to move and depend like marionettes on the strings of the system. In the context of increasing privatization of public spaces the paintings illustrate a dystopia which might come to life when the transit *pass-over* deals with will have transformed into a permanent state. This raises another question: What can be done?

## Implications

Our study has showed that Landau's paintings provide a critical perspective on approaches to staging corporate events. Landau's art wants to make visible organizational suppression, takes the perspective of small shareholders and, in more general terms, the lost subjects in spaces designed to be passed through or consumed rather than appropriated – cold, mechanistic spaces that seem to be everywhere. The artist reflects the interplay of markets and spaces and illustrates the perceived emptiness of such 'non-places' in which all elements contribute to atmospheres of interchangeability and emptiness. The pictures make us think about people's identities in atmospheres filled with non-time and managerial discourses, rendering them 'as spoil' and impersonal. There seems to be no space for humanity, for individuality and critical reflection. Everything – like art which is misused for the sake of corporate reputation – is emptied. Landau's paintings are found to represent ideas of uniformity in a striking, compelling way, which gives them force and momentum. The strength of the artworks lies in the artists' subversive method to expose organizational phenomena and details to sharpen our senses.



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**Brigitte Biehl** has interviewed the German painter Verena Landau on critical approaches to AGMs. This enriched Biehl's own interdisciplinary analysis of management presentations from a Theatre Studies perspective, for which she was awarded the German Public Relations Award for young researchers by DPRG in 2004. Her work is complemented by insights gained from practical experience as a former financial communications consultant and freelance business journalist. Biehl is now a lecturer at the School of Management and Business, University of Wales, Aberystwyth.

Dr Brigitte Biehl  
School of Management and Business  
University of Wales, Aberystwyth  
Aberystwyth  
SY23 3DD  
United Kingdom  
Tel: +44 1970 622204, Fax: +44 1970 622409, bbb@aber.ac.uk

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