

## **New Horizons for *Organizational Aesthetics***

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We launched *Organizational Aesthetics* (OA) in 2012, with four sections, Theory, Practice, Art, and Reviews. And perhaps most importantly there was a piece by Nancy Adler that didn't fit into any of the sections. Over the years, pieces that didn't fit into any of the sections have been amongst my favorite pieces as I have always believed that OA should be a home for work that is at the edge of academic and artistic conventions – work that doesn't fit neatly anywhere else.

OA was meant to follow on from *Aesthesis* (much of which is available on the OA website), which also included work that didn't fit nicely within existing academic conventions, work that pushed the edges of the academic and practice conversations about art and management, conversations about the aesthetics of and within organizations. Here, I mean conversations broadly construed, in the sense that a work of art is part of a conversation with how we make sense of our world in the same broad way that tightly argued social theory is a part of a conversation with how we make sense of our world.

In the decade since we launched OA, the edge of the conversation has moved and although the conversation within OA has also moved, it now feels like time to take a look at where we are and where we might want to be going forward. As a starting place, I looked at the total number of views of articles (not the abstracts) from January 2021 through mid-October 2022 with the thought that the number of views of articles in the last year and a half offers us some sense of what the community overall is most interested in.

The most viewed article was [The Role of Art and the Artist](#) by Edgar Schein, which was published 2013 as an editorial and was an expanded version of piece that Ed had previously published in a journal that was no longer widely accessible. The second most viewed article was [Fully Embracing the Paradoxical Condition: Banksy to Organization Theory](#) by Miguel Pina e Cunha, Stewart Clegg, Marco Berti, Arménio Rego and Ace V. Simpson, which was published in 2021 as a practice article. The third most viewed article was [The Values of Starchitecture: Commodification of Architectural Design in Contemporary Cities](#) by Davide Ponzini as part of a special topic on *Evolutions and Hybrids of Aesthetic Judgment and Value in Cultural Industries and Art Markets* in 2014 (It was originally meant to be a special issue, but we ended up without enough accepted articles for a full special issue, so we published it as a special topic within a regular issue). The fourth most viewed article was [The Concept of Atmosphere in Management and Organization Studies](#) by Christian Julmi which we published as a theory article in 2017. The fifth most viewed article was [Fashionable Interventions: The Pop-up Store as Differential Space](#) by Anja Overdiek, which was published as a practice article in 2017.

I think that at their best, the articles in *Organizational Aesthetics* manage to hold the tension between intellectual clarity and embodied subjectivity. That is to say, we have tried to encourage the messy, felt (aesthetic) experience be as much a part of the article as the

analytic insights. We have encouraged authors to walk their talk, to write in ways that are as aesthetically pleasing as they are intellectually clear. I think this aspiration is realized to different extents in the five most viewed articles. It is perhaps clearest for me in pieces such as Antonio Strati's "[Do You Play With Philosophy?](#)". And it is also more apparent when compared with the overly-intellectualized, mainstream journal articles on aesthetics in organizations that seem to do everything possible to avoid messy, felt experiences, such as [The Aesthetic Dimension of Organizing](#) in *The Academy of Management Annals*. My hope is that regardless of where the edge is or what the conversation, we will continue to aspire to this.

The most common topic for articles submitted to *OA* has been about the use of arts within organizations, often focused on specific uses of the arts within organizational development or training, and residencies by artists within organizations. When trying to describe what we are looking for in this area, I often point authors to one of the pieces from our inaugural issue in 2012, [Outlaw Girl: The Challenge of Designing Poetry Exercises for an Organizational Context](#) by Jane Hilberry. Jane offers an interesting insight into the process that is potentially applicable to other arts-based approaches, while including the specifics of her own approach, and including the problems she runs into as well as the successes she has. It is again, a difficult tension to manage, made more difficult by the needs of many of our authors who are also independent practitioners with a need to have materials they can share with potential clients. Many submissions start off reading like collateral marketing pieces, and we have worked (not always successfully) to help the authors find a form to share their work that takes a fuller and more nuanced view of the work. This feels to me like an area that will continue to be at the forefront of the journal as practitioners continue to struggle with how to share the learning from the rich, nuanced, complex reality of working with the arts in organizations.

I think the most innovative aspect of *OA* was the art section. The idea behind it was that making art about organizations was in many ways similar to writing theory about organizations (Taylor & Hansen, 2005) – both were efforts to make sense of organizational reality. They were, of course, different in many ways, but the drive is the same. Our most viewed art is [Points of Contact: A Photographic Exploration](#) by Lasse Lynchell that we published in 2021 and I think that it a good example of an arts-based inquiry. It also barely cracks the top 75 most viewed, which suggests that the Art section has in some way failed to connect with our community. During the last decade, the arts as research has grown enormously and now there are several journals such as [The Journal for Artistic Research](#), [Nordic Journal for Artistic Research](#), and [PARSE](#) devoted to publishing art as research. However, none of these focus on art as research within or for organizations, per se. All of these journals do have a richer, aesthetic web presence than the current *OA* website, which in many ways reminds me of the original *Aesthesis* journal, in which every article in every issue was individually designed and printed in a beautiful, full-color, format. Hopefully, we will find a way to enhance our own aesthetic web presence and become part of the art as research eco-system.

As I look to the future of *Organizational Aesthetics*, I can't help but look to the past and *Aesthesis*. It was aesthetically beautiful, the pages were filled with interesting and unusual contributions that by and large wouldn't have fit in other journals. Each piece honored the individual sensibilities of that piece rather than forcing the pieces to a standard sensibility for the journal. We have lost some of this in *OA* as we found ways to address the challenges of creating a journal that would survive over time. But I think we aspire to those same values and will continue to aspire to them.

Just as important as the finished product is the process, the way we try and work. Journals depend on the volunteer labor of the editors, the authors, and the reviewers and that often leads to frustrating processes as that work is a lower priority than other things in their lives. That has certainly been true at times for *OA*, but I also like to think that we have always tried to manage the process with respect and support for everyone involved. We have tried

to create the same sort of ethos you find at *The Art of Management and Organization* conferences, where half-baked ideas are encouraged, where genuinely generative conversations are the norm.

As we go forward, we need to re-evaluate the organizing structures, from the editorial board and editors to how we engage reviewers and authors. But the underlying values about how the process should work shouldn't change. There continue to be challenges. Our financial model is one of open access for readers and no article publication fees for authors. In short, there is no income of any form and the real expenses of hosting an online journal of been picked up by my university, WPI. The much greater expense of writing, reviewing, editing, formatting, and managing has all been done by volunteers, out of love for the journal. This is a model that feels tenuous at best. Meanwhile, the world of journal publishing has changed greatly in the last decade and continues to evolve towards more open access, but also greater concentration into fewer academic publishers and more and more tension around how the whole system works. We also sit with a certain tension around academic journal ranking schemes. We have by and large made little to no effort to be included in those schemes with the thinking that once ranked it is difficult to change your ranking and perhaps no ranking at all is better than a low ranking.

So, what is the new horizon we are sailing towards? I don't see it clearly, but I do believe that continuing to work from our values will get us there. I think that "there" will continue to include insightful and rich work on how we learn from and apply the arts within organizations, and will continue to develop aesthetically richer ways to communicate the complex knowing that is emerging in our community. I hope that also means expanding our community and working with other communities such as the "art as research" world and other kindred spirits we encounter along the way. And in the way that Barry and Meisiek (2010) suggest that art is more about departures and craft is more about destinations, I hope that *OA* continues to be more art than craft.

## References

- Barry, D., & Meisiek, S. 2010. The art of leadership and its fine art shadow. *Leadership*, 6(3): 331-349.
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