"Performing” the Managerial Project: Aesthetic and Artistic Approaches to Critical Management Studies

Abstract
Taking seriously the idea of critical management studies (CMS) as a “performative project” (Spicer et al. 2009), I draw on approaches originating in the arts and humanities, particularly in performance studies, to sketch a specific approach that involves arts-based methods, which already are being used in management studies. The idea is to create performances as organisational research. Such approaches add a new dimension to critical performativity, namely “performativity” in the sense of theatrical performing, showing and doing. Drawing on the specific expertise of management scholars, these performances may involve organizational stakeholders and the public and provide a critical perspective on management practice. Performative forms are accepted research activities in the humanities alongside the writing practices which are traditional in universities. On an institutional level, this topic opens the door to a “performative turn” in CMS, to academic activism, alternatives to the publishing treadmill, forms of resistance towards “masculine” academic writing, and last but not least to opportunities within business schools for researchers with a performing arts background.

Introduction
Given the aesthetic and performative turn that is glowing on the horizon in management studies the time is ripe for “performance” in the theatrical, rather than managerial, sense. We witness increasing scholarly interest in the aesthetic side of organisations (Taylor & Hansen, 2005) and some management scholars already have resorted to arts-based research methods, including the use of fabrics, painting, and theatre. These forms of arts-based organisational inquiry (Buchanan & Bryman, 2007) can be developed to create research-driven performances that are not purely artistic, but comprise activism and realistic theatrical presentation. This idea concurs with a broader socio-economic trend: namely that artists and artistic activists have come to oppose market forces and their powers in new ways. Within this “artistic resistance” individuals who joined the diverse Occupy movements have made contributions to modern art exhibitions (Biehl-Missal 2013a,b), individual painters have created pictures of suppressive corporate meetings (Biehl 2007), and artist-activists have invaded the Tate Modern for protests
against oil-company sponsorship (Chong 2013). Rimini Protokoll (2009), a collective of theatrical directors, has channelled 200 theatre spectators into an official annual shareholder meeting of a global company to encourage them to reflect on managerial impression management and on the occasionally turbulent negotiation of corporate power. Many artists however still struggle to understand the corporate world and lack knowledge of management theory (Brellochs & Schrat 2005, p. 12), so critical management scholars could contribute their special expertise to the creation of similar performances.

The idea to engage in arts-based research expressed in performances and action is rather new to management scholars but is common practice in other disciplines. Academics in the humanities create actual artistic projects which count towards the Research Excellence Framework (REF). In the performance studies discipline for example, this may include the direction of a performance or the organisation of an exhibition (e.g. Pearson & Hardy 2011; Pearson 2010, Pearson & Hardy 2009, Roms 2008).

From the perspective of a business school lecturer with a PhD in theatre studies, I am now making the tentative, yet exciting suggestion that CMS could implement such a literal “performative” perspective and attitude in ways which strengthen its critical impact. This approach may be of interest to critical management scholars who consider some playful activism and, in business schools, to people with a background in the social sciences and the humanities (Rowlinson & Hassard 2011). Sociologists have seen the emergence of the academic-activist who is engaged in social oppositions and particularly with realist trends in contemporary performance and social theatrical activism (Occupy), this door is open not only to those with artistic abilities.

In the next section of the paper, I shall provide information about how researchers from performance studies departments engage in what they call “practice as research”, i.e. creating performative research output in addition to written research output. The main arguments then will be transferred to management studies in the following sections which are concerned with scholarly interest in the arts, the use of arts-based methods, and the critical stance of aesthetic organisation studies that resonate CMS tenets. Then I am going to discuss how researchers in CMS could create performance projects about organisations, management, and leadership not to uphold or promote belief in the managerial project, but to negotiate meaning and to encourage resistance and possible change. I am going to present an example of a “performative” intervention, where theatre directors with some research support invaded a shareholder meeting. This example of arts-based research methods accounts for all five aspects of critical performativity (affirmation, care, pragmatism, potentiality, normativity) outlined by Spicer and colleagues (2009) and even “outperforms” some of the categories. In the discussion and conclusion, I reflect on some caveats and possibilities for performances in CMS.
Practice as research in performance studies

Researchers in theatre, film and media studies departments often engage in so-called “practice as research” (PARIP 2006, Nelson 2013). Although this term makes no mention of “art”, it is comparable to the notion of “arts-based methods” in management studies (Taylor & Hansen 2005, p. 1221), which I shall explore in a later section of the paper. In keeping with documentation of the Research Excellence Framework (REF), the former Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) and Arts and Humanities Research Board (AHRB), the term encompasses performance media such as theatre, dance, film, video and television (PARIP 2006). These forms are submitted as research activities and outcomes alongside the writing practices traditionally used in universities.¹ The REF, RAE and AHRB provide the main structural framework for contesting, funding and validating performative approaches (Piccini 2003).

With regard to validation, the REF (2011, p. 22, italics added) states that: “In addition to printed academic work, research outputs may include, but are not limited to: new materials, devices, images, artefacts, products and buildings; confidential or technical reports; intellectual property, whether in patents or other forms; performances, exhibits or events; work published in non-print media. An underpinning principle of the REF is that all forms of research output will be assessed on a fair and equal basis. Sub-panels will not regard any particular form of output as of greater or lesser quality than another per se.” There is an additional requirement for performance projects: “For non-text or practice-based outputs (performances, artefacts and so on), a description of the research process, only where this is not evident within the output (maximum 300 words).” To comply with university norms and to make manifest a research contribution, which typically is demonstrable by bibliography, abstract, literature review, citations, etc., researchers doing performances have to “have a set of separable, demonstrable, research findings that are abstractable, not simply locked into the experience of performing it” (PARIP 2006). An additional short theoretical text about the piece of practice would hence “set out the originality of piece, set it in an appropriate context, and (make) it useful to the wider research community” (PARIP 2006). To make clear the original contribution of knowledge through arts-based research methods, organisational scholars also suggest adding written work (Taylor 2003). With regard to the often ephemeral nature of performances in comparison to other artistic artefacts, issues relating to storing and retrieving become particularly relevant.

The evaluation of the performative research output is then subject to peer-review and the assessment panel. Particularly with regard to this issue, the establishment of arts-based research output in management studies would need to involve some strategic or grassroot lobbying within UK HEIs – a topic that needs further discussion. In the next section however, I shall provide some theory to link the idea of performances to critical management studies and build an understanding about its possibilities.

¹ I would like to thank my former colleague Heike Roms, Professor for Performance Studies, Aberystwyth University, for providing comments on this topic and suggesting further literature. Some of the assessments about the instrumentalisation of practice as research (p.9) are derived from her talk at the „Table Talks Artistic Research“ at 19 April 2013, Urania Berlin, Universität der Künste Berlin.
Towards a “performative” theory for CMS

Organisational aesthetics and the critical perspective

Creating actual performances as research can be seen as a logical development following from the increased impact of arts and aesthetics in management theory and practice. The rise of practice-based research in the performing arts (drama, theatre, dance, music) and related disciplines involving performance media (film, video, television, radio) is explained as follows by the University of Bristol’s Practice as Research Project² (PARIP 2006, emphases added): “The contribution of the arts and cultural industries to national health and prosperity has climbed up the political agenda. A growing number of performing arts/ media departments in higher education are now offering higher degrees which place practice at the heart of their research programmes. This represents a major theoretical and methodological shift in the performance disciplines — traditional approaches to the study of these arts are complemented and extended by research pursued through the practice of them.” (PARIP 2006, emphases added). Many of these developments related to the theoretical inspiration and practical use of the arts that encouraged practical research in performance studies also apply to management and organisation studies.

The arts increasingly are seen as an inspiration and useful tool in a management context. A growing area of research is concerned with the aesthetics of organisational life, and with the relationship and impact of artistic concepts and methods on management, leadership and organisation (Taylor & Hansen 2005). Aesthetic and theatrical elements can be found in many dimensions of organisational behaviour, including for example presentations by top managers (Biehl-Missal 2011a). Artistic concepts such as the organisation-as-theatre metaphor and analogies of jazz and orchestras have been used for a couple of decades now as heuristic tools for organisational theorising (Cornelissen 2004). A consequence of the conceptual relation of arts and business is the growing use of actual arts-based methods such as theatre in organisations, performances, sculpture, music and dance for organisational leadership development (Berthoin Antal & Strauß, 2013). This is an answer to calls for new social, creative and communication skills following scandals in banking, the media and the public sector, which have exposed limitations of current management practice. Similar endeavours can be seen in business schools which emphasise arts-based management education and include theatre performances, reading of literature and other practical projects (Adler 2006). Deficiencies in management practice and the potential of culture and the arts have led to the emergence of a diverse field of research concerned with the relationship of art and management. This field is related in many ways to critical management studies.

Resonating CMS’s most obvious intent not to further the effectiveness of managerial practice (Fournier & Grey 2000), research foregrounding aesthetics

---

² A reference point for the discussion is the University of Bristol’s now finished PARIP (2006) project which ran from 2000 to 2005. It explored creative-academic issues raised by practice as research and aimed to develop “frameworks for the encouragement of the highest standards in representing practical-creative research within academic contexts”.


(efficacy) implicitly is critical of mainstream management research, simply by not putting efficiency and input-output-relations on the top of the list. Most of the aesthetic perspectives can be seen as critical in terms of anti-performativity (Grey & Wilmott 2005) as they adopt an adversarial position towards the instrumental sphere and questions of efficiency and effectiveness that motivate and dominate traditional management research. Some studies with an aesthetic approach are exceptional to this by discussing how aesthetic factors can be applied for the manipulation of people, particularly in the marketing field (e.g. Caldwell and Hibbert 2002). But even in the marketing field, more recent critical studies on the aesthetics of consumption state that they take a “critical approach, not aiming to improve the effectiveness of marketing strategies by increasing people’s inclination to consume” (Biehl-Missal & Saren 2012, p. 168), adhering to aesthetic approaches and to, most commonly, critical theory to outline issues of manipulation and possible resistance.

Many studies in organizational research concerned with the aesthetic side of organizational life are critical by their nature of addressing issues of power and control in organizations (Warren & Rehn 2006), including intangible, atmospheric strategies that influence people corporeally and often subconsciously. The field generally does not aim to further the managerialist project, being critical and often interested in the emancipatory potential of aesthetics – an objective of critical performativity (Spicer et al. 2009). In the light of the question asked in this paper, I would wonder how researchers could use aesthetic practices not to uphold or further belief in the managerial project, but to negotiate meaning, and to encourage resistance and possible change. I suggest that the use of arts-based methods developed into performances might be a viable option.

**The use of arts-based methods for performative interventions**

Building on the performative dimension in the sense of Austin (1963), where ‘things are done with words’ that are not true or false, rather exerting some kind of action, CMS endeavours become actually “performative” when they include elements of artful doing, behaving and showing. In the organizational aesthetics field, the use of actual arts-based means to generate and represent research findings is seen as a promising avenue and as a way of conveying the “aesthetic experience” of organizations in more compelling ways. Taylor and Hansen (2005: 1223) speak about “artistic inquiry into aesthetic organizational issues” that accounts for the experiential dimension of aesthetics research, employing poems, songs, multi-media tracks or theatre performances.

Arts-based methods can be used during the research process (often named “artistic research”, Hannula et al. 2005) and also for the presentation of research findings. Examples of artistic forms of presentation are poems (Darmer 2006), fabrics (Rippin 2006), paintings (Adler 2010) and theatre plays (Taylor 2003). The notion of “performance” as “behaving, showing and doing” (Schechner 2002) would be used for theatre and the reading of poems and some sort of engaged presentation or manufacture of fabrics – I shall give an example in the next section. As indicated above, the principal aim of these approaches is not to contribute to increased organisational efficiency, but to present findings in an aesthetically appropriate way so as to enable audiences to
develop a more holistic understanding of organisational life. One may suggest that arts-based presentations unfold further potential when they encourage reflection, becoming “performative” in the sense of Spicer and colleagues (2009) by “performatively” (Schechner 2002) contributing to the discourse and playing out their liminal potential.

This approach has been greeted with scepticism from traditional management studies focused on objective knowledge and causal theories, because it adopts subjective views that hardly are capable of claiming to reveal generalizable knowledge: “Giving up explanatory approaches to studying organizational action is anathema to a social science that is dominated by positivism” (Taylor & Carboni 2008, p. 221). Ann Rippin (2006) has described how her subjective explorations were referred to derogatively and as self-indulgent by particular members of the academic management community. Piccini (2003), in her historiography of practice as research, where she accounts for the politically-charged institutional contexts of ‘creative practice’ in UK HE, emphasised the creation of embodied forms of knowledge as the fundamental epistemological contribution of practice as research to the Higher Education sector. Conceptions have changed and artistic research has become more accepted (Hannula et al. 2005). Arts-based methods have become part of social science (Knowles & Cole 2007) and were included in the organisational canon, for example in the Sage Handbook of Organization Research Methods (Buchanan & Bryman, 2009). But in his more recent book about research as practice Nelson (2013), from a theatre studies perspective, still argues that with the “performance turn”, old prejudices should be abandoned and that practical forms of research with arts-based methodologies and different modes of knowledge-production in a multi-mode research inquiry should be fully accepted in the academy.

To explain the barriers to aesthetic forms of inquiry that exist within management studies, and to discuss this issue in some greater detail, I will refer to an older and widely-cited text about artistic methods (Eisner, 1981) that captures many of these still-existing normative understandings. Eisner (1981) had identified several dimensions in which artistic and scientific approaches to research differ. I shall elaborate on some of these points to support my argument that arts-based methods can be a distinctive yet valid tool for CMS in particular.

Eisner (1981, p. 4) draws on a definition of scientific research as inquiries that “use formal instruments as the primary basis for data collection, that transform the data collected into numerical indices of one kind or another, and that attempt to generalize in a formal way to some universe beyond itself”. Differences are first to be found in the presentation, including a codified written form and neutralized language in the dominant science tradition versus an openly metaphoric, subjective form of aesthetic expression in artistic research. Precisely this dominating academic style has attracted some critique, for example from a gender studies perspective which outlines that these male forms of writing suppress “female” forms of expression which may be seen as more corporeal and non-linear forms of writing (Höpfl, 2000). With regard to epistemological changes, interdisciplinary approaches with a focus on aesthetics and embodied experience contributed to a gradual dissolution of “neutral” writing styles, even to the inclusion of the first person singular in management research. This epistemological perspective suggests new ways of generating and analysing data and challenges
traditional understandings (Eisner 1981, p. 4) of scientific validity which used to be defined by the use of large amounts of quantitative data collected by random sampling or by experimentation.

Scientifically oriented research has been defined in relation to someone’s interest in anticipating or controlling reality. In contrast artistically oriented research, as an hermeneutic activity, is after “explication” (Eisner 1981, p. 8). CMS and other critical studies with their anti-performative paradigm challenge traditional scientific understanding and can be seen as hermeneutic, along with the humanities and organisational aesthetics research.

With aesthetic perspectives, the “manifest behaviour” of people as the primary point of focus of scientific approaches (Eisner 1981, p. 6) has been broadened to include the “experience”, the aesthetic and sensual elements of behaviour, which are the focus of artistic inquiry. With this, possibilities for scientific generalization were weakened as the aesthetic experience is subjective and difficult to verbalise. Issues of fact (science) and fiction (art) (Eisner 1981, p. 7) also became contested with critical approaches reflecting on the extent to which management discourses and imperatives colonize people's everyday lives, making them re-enact some kind of management fiction (Hancock & Tyler 2004). On the other hand, art became more realistic with the performative turn wherein fiction was replaced by reality and experience. For example newer and newest forms of theatre, so-called postdramatic trends, have introduced forms of not-acting and reality display replacing fictional roles and complex acting by self-presentation and suspending fictional plot structures (Lehmann 2006).

The following section will provide an example for a critical “performance” of management research, featuring organisational reality. Its particular framing and theoretical underpinnings do not aim merely to expose management practise, but enable an informed approach to an audience of stakeholders by providing a broad range of sources and experts.

**Example for a performance combining art, research and reality**
The following example uses performance to critically convey research findings. Some time ago, I used theatre theory to analyse the theatrical staging (“performance”) of top managers in corporate events (Biehl-Missal 2011a). The analysis exposed the complex interplay of scenography, lighting, clothing, managers’ performance style, rhetoric, and audience interaction. This is a situation where aesthetic practices are employed to increase organisational efficiency by building corporate reputation and investor confidence. Rather than determining one ‘best way’ of managerial acting, the interpretive study showed that these organizational events are co-created and contested theatrical performances with a potential for audience resistance and possible change as well as for managerial persuasion. This approach led to an artistic co-operation with a group of theatre directors, Rimini Protokoll (2009), who used Daimler's Annual General Meeting in Berlin as a ready-made and reconstructed it as a theatre play entitled *Hauptversammlung (Annual general meeting)*. Two hundred theatre spectators entered the event via the purchase of shares in Daimler or as proxies (Biehl-Missal 2012). Rather than merely “exposing” issues of theatrical manipulation, the aim of this performance or
critical aesthetic organizational inquiry was to make people experience and consciously reflect upon issues of power, persuasion and interaction, leaving it to them to draw their own conclusions. The particular framing consisted of a two-hour briefing to the theatre audience; a 112-page brochure containing theoretical material, the stock corporation law, and 360° interviews conducted by the artists with activists, critics, researchers, PR people, lawyers, a painter and a hostess. A telephone hotline provided further information and sound effects. Another outcome of the project was that 25 culture journalists filed stories on the project, transporting the AGM into the nationwide feuilletons, creating an amused and distanced discourse about the “theatre” which was in sharp contrast with the standard discourse found in financial media which focused on efficiency, returns on investment and shareholder value.

Such an artistic “performance” project accounts for all five aspects of critical performativity (Spicer et al. 2009) and even outperforms some of the categories. In terms of “affirmation” the performance was “at close proximity” (Spicer et al. 2009, p. 546), taking place right in the organization. With regard to “care”, participants were respected since their views were challenged but without proposing a particular perspective: they were left to develop their own associations. While managerial “acting” towards audiences usually aims to restrict their perception, artistic modes of communication may create a sense of what could be different (Biehl-Missal 2010) – the very thing achieved in Hauptversammlung by framing the event differently and turning it into a performance. In the live situation, this was complemented by unfiltered attacks and criticism of Daimler by attending shareholders who were not part of the theatre audience, thereby shedding a different light on corporate opportunities. This accounts for “potentiality”, creating a “sense of what could be by engaging latent possibilities in an organization” (Spicer at al. 2009: 546).

In terms of “pragmatism” (Spicer et al. 2009: 550), organizations were not treated as entities, but rather the plurality of actors was presented. Theatrically-framed settings with their diversity and difference to everyday life, including the AGM, are heterotopias par excellence (Foucault 1984/2000). In terms of “normativity”, such projects are full of ethical and moral questions that can also be spelled out by the artist-researchers verbally to stimulate participants, of course without providing definite answers (Biehl-Missal 2012). The issue of micro-emancipation (Spicer et al. 2009: 553) is prevalent when each participant is asked to reflect on her/his role in what the project called “the capitalist mass” (Rimini Protokoll 2009). The programme book provided theoretical material for individual reflection on this motive that was experience aesthetically by audiences in the live situation.

This case shows that research into the aesthetics of organisational life, complemented with arts-based methods, can become a performative project that unfolds a critical impact and brings research findings to stakeholders in a different ways.

This example is a combination of a completed empirical research project and an artistic project directed by professional artists that used actual organisational reality. Other pieces of research as performance can be structured differently, perhaps involving arts-based research processes simultaneously and relying less on artists. However, I wanted to show that with postdramatic trends in performance, the creation of such
projects involves research and organisational skill, rather than particular artistic skills which may be necessary in traditional forms of theatre with fictional acting, direction and dramaturgy. There are many possibilities which needed to be discussed by the CMS community.

**Discussion**

The suggestion to use performances along with traditional forms of research output in management studies surely will need facilitation in the HE and REF contexts. Supporters could emphasise the practical aspect that performances are applied arts-based methods which also are embraced in management development, e.g. when managers play theatre and do creative things. This however implies that the issue of instrumentalization needs to be considered as well. If nothing else, the relatively fast and smooth adaption of "practice as research"/arts-based methods in humanities and arts departments in UK HE can be traced back not to epistemological perspectives, but precisely to the practical use value. The tradition of practical orientation with artists working as lecturers in the UK has helped the process, along with strong economic arguments which are considered to dominate valid epistemological questions: the demand to "make an impact", which applied art naturally possesses, helps to secure necessary funding for researchers in the humanities. Performance scholars\(^1\) make the criticism that practice as research in this sense was often instrumentalised as social work, for example when theatre projects were made with stakeholder groups. To go one step further, it can be suggested that, with this chase for funding, academics doing practical artistic research are forced to reproduce precarious working models known from the world of arts to get funding and develop their career.

This rather negative view may be of concern not only to arts and humanities departments. Given the trend towards using arts-based methods for management development and education, critically intended performances could degenerate into applied projects for students and organisational members. The use of arts-based methods in organisations is indeed ambivalent, oscillating between challenging inspiration and an efficient management tool – an issue which needs further exploration (Berthoin Antal & Strauß 2013). From a business school perspective however, I would still argue that arts-based research means an increase in academic possibilities and opens up new opportunities to make a critical impact once it is accepted as being capable of generating institutionally-accepted research outputs.

**Conclusion**

The performance of research has been continuously debated and practiced over the last two decades, particularly in the arts and humanities, and may be an option for CMS too. To become accepted the idea would need some grassroots lobbying within UK HEIs and management studies circles. This leads to a range of questions which already have been debated in other fields (Piccini 2003) and which include how original contributions to
knowledge might be conceptualized and assessed/evaluated/judged. Of relevance also is who decides. Furthermore, specific kinds of resourcing and infrastructures needed to be defined and developed for performances as research.

This paper has outlined a number of arguments to build a basic support for the idea of generating performances about management and organisation. The growing field of art, aesthetics and management including the use of arts in business and arts-based research methods may serve as a bridge. Performances as aesthetic inquiry can be classified as “critical” in the sense of being anti-performative, by emphasising aesthetics instead of efficiency, and by operating from a liminal norm, from the margin, often dealing with power issues in organisations. I have presented an example from a performance project that involved organisational reality and stakeholders and operated independent from an organisation. More generally, performances as research output may constitute an alternative to the publishing treadmill for those who question the sense of journal rankings and commercial publishing with restricted access. From a gender perspective, the dominating academic writing style has been criticized as a male discourse suppressing “female” forms of expression (Höpfl, 2000). Arts-based forms of expression operate beyond this discourse and can be seen as a practice which uses more corporeal, emotional and non-linear forms of creation – an issue that I would want to analyse further elsewhere. In this sense, performance as research can be considered as yet another form of critical resistance within management studies.

In some ways, performances may also serve as – in the words of the stream convenors – a “comfortable haven” in which to share ideas and critically engage in the study of, and against, management. But I have suggested that this approach can be seen as an initiative of “antimanagement”, undermining it through critique, being provocative and maybe offensive (Burrell 1993). Making stakeholder audiences “experience” managerial practice in a different theoretical and artistic context avoids being isolated and disengaged from managerial practice (Anthony 1998). Performance projects may hence be of interest to CMS scholars who wish to engage in some activism. Occupy movements for example have used realist, performative means to mix social critique and artistic context (Biehl-Missal, 2013b: 4). Of interest to other disciplines is the emergence of the academic-activist who is engaged in social oppositions while conducting (more-than) his/her research, and participatory or solidarity action research (Chatterton 2008). The playful and artistic face of performance could enable CMS scholars to make an active impact.

Developing this proposal of a “performative” stream in CMS, which draws on the humanities, performance studies or the fine arts, might reposition the professional identity of some “immigrant” management scholars. With regard to those, I personally wonder what form of change on an institutional level could be possible. This regards the UK, and my home country Germany which recently has seen some advances in CMS (e.g. Hartz 2011). Are there opportunities for interdisciplinary co-operations between critical management studies and other areas such as theatre studies and cultural studies? What opportunities are there for professorial chairs with a specific denomination in a discipline which combines CMS and performance, art, aesthetics? Future debates could explore how to “play out” these ideas. More generally a lurking question, under all these
discussions about performative academic intervention, is: what alternative forms of organisational management do we have in mind? A utopian perspective pertaining to possibilities of social life (and its relation to economic questions) is at the centre of countless artistic endeavours and will necessarily inform and accompany performative scholarly action.

**Literature**


---

3 At this point, I would like to thank my friend Tony McGuinness, a happily retired academic who is pleased that his days in the academy are over, for pointing out the obvious – which I had almost forgotten during the writing process.


Practice as Research in Performance (2006) Department of Drama: Theatre, Film, Television | University of Bristol. Available online: http://www.bristol.ac.uk/parip/


