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The riddle and the chair:
aesthetics, art and design in organizational life

Abstract
In this essay on aesthetics, art and design in organizational life, I will focus on the emergence of the aesthetic study of organization in the sociology of organization, organizational theories and management studies. This area of organization studies formed in the 1980s contributed, together with other new approaches to the study of organization, to the renewal of organizational studies with a European theoretical and methodological perspective. Four approaches articulate this new organizational perspective: the archaeological approach, the empathic-logical approach, the aesthetic approach, and the artistic approach. These approaches are crossed by the hermeneutic, aesthetic and performative philosophical sensibilities. They problematize the rational interpretations of organizations in order to bring into light features of organizational life that are comprehensible through aesthetics, such as the materiality of organization that, in this article, the riddle and the chair highlight thanks also to the visual interlude constituted by the photopoem Homage to Giò Pont".*

Keywords
Organizational aesthetics, Philosophical sensibilities, Chair/design

1. *Introduction*

The personal contact between cultivated people and workers – observed a century ago the German sociologist Georg Simmel (1908a; Eng. tr. 2009: 577) in his *Excursus on the sociology of sense impression* –, this personal contact that is "so often enthusiastically advocated for the social development of the present" and that is "also recognized by the cultivated as the ethical ideal of closing the gap between two worlds 'of which one does not know how the other lives', simply fails before the insurmountable nature of the olfactory sense impressions". The social question is not just an ethical and rational issue, but also a

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nasal issue, that is a question of sensory perception which gives form to social relations. For this motive, this question is sociologically relevant for understanding human action in society, despite the fact that perceptual faculty and aesthetic judgment are barely studied in sociology and social theory.

More recently, the American sociologist Patricia Y. Martin emphasized the relevance of the odors in the organizational life of a residence for the elderly. The smells of residents and the odors of cleaning products in use characterize everyday social practices and the quotidian working life in this organization. "Many people who have read this article recalled smells from a visit to an old people's (or nursing) home", writes Patricia Martin (2002: 879-80) concluding her essay:

One said, "That's what it's like; that's how it is. It smells… like cabbage [cooking] or something strong… like you say". People who visit a family member may be anxious about whether their loved one is being well cared for or whether s/he should be there at all and their senses may be heightened, including the sense of smell. Perhaps anxiety associated with my research heightened my sense of smell. Was I unusual in hating the stench of cleaning fluids? After I experienced that odor and judged it repulsive, everything I experienced thereafter was affected; I could not ignore it. I fought an impulse to hold my nose or leave and I experienced a surge of empathy for residents in wondering how they could have an appetite or enjoy a meal. Greater attention to experience(s) associated with smells and aromas in residential and other organizations would be useful because […] current norms require organizations to be "silent" on smell. When this norm is violated, is an organization judged as aesthetically flawed?

Martin makes these considerations in her contribution to the special issue of the international journal "Human Relations" (2002) dedicated to "organising aesthetics". The area of study of organization's aesthetics (Gagliardi 2006, Ramírez 2005, Ratiu 2017, Strati 2019, Taylor, Hansen 2005) is in fact a collective social construction due to international debates that have configured this area of sociology of organization, organizational theory, and management studies, as documented by international journals and edited books ("Academy of Management Review" 1992, Barry, Hansen 2008, Costa, Nacamulli 1997, "Dragon, the Journal of SCOS" 1987, Gagliardi 1990, "Human Relations" 2002, King, Vickery 2013, Linstead, Höpfl 2000, "Organization" 1996, "Scandinavian Journal of Management" 2014, "Tamara. Journal of Critical Postmodern Organization Science" 2002, Turner 1990). It is important to emphasize that:

- all this happened with the Cultural Turn occurred in the organization studies in the 80s;
- "aesthetics" delineates, on one hand, the organizational dimension to be explored to understand the organization and, on the other hand, "aesthetics" characterizes the way in which the organizational study is conducted;
- the comprehension of organizational life through the lens of aesthetics constitutes principally a European contribution to the theories of organization.

Four different styles of research in organizational aesthetics – *archaeological approach* (Berg, Kreiner 1990), *empathic-logical approach* (Gagliardi 2006), *aesthetic approach* (Strati 1999), and *artistic approach* (Guillet de Monthoux 2004) – have been outlined in the midst of the flowering of a variety of novel approaches to the study of organizations based on Feminist Gender Studies, on Post-Structuralism, on the study of Organizational Emotions, on the methodological theories on Art Practices and Research and, more importantly, on the approach of Organizational Symbolism.

The latter, in fact, represents the "common ground" in which aesthetics has met the organization. Organizational Symbolism focused on the symbolic construction of organizational life – rather than on structure, function, role and hierarchy – on the assumption that organizations "are" organizational cultures rather than just objective entities that "have" culture as an important resource among others, such as, for example, structure and power.

The special issue on "art and organization" of "Dragon, the Journal of SCOS" (1987) – which for a couple of years was the international journal of the academic network engaged in the study of organizational symbolism and culture, currently replaced by "Culture and Organization" – published one of the crucial debates from which the organizational aesthetics research originated. This special issue focused on art, aesthetics and organization without referring in particular to the physical structures of the organization, but to (a) the gathering of organizational knowledge through "analogies with art" – manager as an artist; managerial practices as artistic styles and genres –, (b) examining the "beauty of the organization" and aesthetic judgments towards the organization as a whole, (c) the investigation of how "aesthetics is negotiated" in aesthetic practices. More direct attention to the organization's physical structures was given a few years later, focusing on the *pathos* of organizational artefacts, their symbolism and their agency as

organizational basic assumptions that operate at pre-cognitive level (Gagliardi 1990).

These essays problematized the rational interpretations of organizational life and the domain of the rational and positivistic paradigm in the construction of organizational theory in sociology, economy, psychology, anthropology, and management studies. My contribution to organizational aesthetics research was situated in this controversy against the domination of the concept of rationality as *the* methodological principle for understanding everyday life in society and organizations (Staubmann, Lidz 2018).

My first essay on the aesthetic dimension of organizational life (Strati 1990) was based on empirical research on the organizational culture of the Italian University Department, the new organizational structure introduced in the formal organization of the University in the 1980s. Three different Departments of the same University were at study – education, mathematics, and visual studies – and, surprisingly, in the Department where rationality was taken for granted for influencing the culture of organizing daily work and organizational relationships, aesthetics emerged as a feature crucial. Not only for the mathematician's work, as was already known in the literature. But also for organizational life, i.e. power relations, group aggregations and discrimination, the reputational hierarchy, organizational communication, the sense attributed to the Department – and this was the novelty that emerged from the empirical research. Instead of being inspired only by rationality and science, the organizational culture of the Mathematics Department was also grounded on aesthetics. Something that was not true for the other two Departments, where the organizational culture resulted based on the social value of usefulness, and the aesthetic dimension of work and organization was seen, in some cases, almost as a "sin".

The problematization of rational interpretations of organizations in order to bring out features of organizational life that are comprehensible through aesthetics represents the main contribution of aesthetics to the sociology of organization, organizational theory and management studies. In a certain sense, this resonates with the problematization of the domain of art that took place in contemporary aesthetic philosophies ("Aisthesis. Pratiche, linguaggi e saperi dell'estetico" 2014, Di Stefano 2017, Przychodzen, Boucher, David 2010; Yuedi, Carter 2014). All four approaches that configure the organizational aes-

thetics research stress a radical criticism against conventionally validated forms of organizational research and theorizing. David Buchanan and Alan Bryman (2009: XXXI) summarize this feature in the introduction to *The Sage handbook of organizational research methods*:

Research in organizational aesthetics (architecture, dress, product design, furnishings, equipment, "atmosphere") is well established in Europe, but not in North America. This perspective offers a new methodological awareness giving theoretical value to notions of ugliness and the sublime, beauty and pathos. An "aesthetic style" of research challenges the dominance of cognitive understanding with four approaches which transgress traditional methods: archaeological, empathic-logical, aesthetic, and artistic. Opposing alienating and manipulative processes, an aesthetic approach is critical of positivist perspectives, challenging the distinction between the value of research and the pleasure of doing it. Critical also of managerial standpoints, aesthetic research is concerned with emancipation and the exercise of aesthetic judgement.

Together with this criticism, my aesthetic approach to the study of organization was characterized by:
- sociological attention to social practices in organizational contexts (Gherardi, Strati 2012), which constituted the *humus* of my research interest to explore the aesthetic dimension of organizational life;
- the study of the microsocial interactions due to sensory impression, which are important for understanding how social activities and structures are constructed out of the immediate individual material (Simmel 1908a; Eng. tr. 2009: 34);
- focus on the tacit dimension of knowledge (Polanyi 1958) which is fundamental for personal knowing, expertise and organizational skill in everyday working life;
- my conceptual research in art photography.
In this article, I will further illustrate and discuss the aesthetic discourse on the organization. I shall begin with my aesthetic style of researching organizational life, thanks to a visual interlude, *Homage to Giò Ponti*. This interlude – from medieval Latin *inter* (between) plus *ludus* (play) – aims to invite the reader to interrupt and suspend the words-experience and, for a moment, to immerse himself/herself in the image-experience to feel its poetry and sense its evocative aesthetics. As Giorgio Agamben observes in his essay *Image and silence* (2012: 95, 97), the "impossibility of speaking – and the power of silence – has two forms, one joyful and the other disturbing", but the "silence that prevails is not the simple suspension of discourse", on the contrary, it is "the silence of the word itself: the idea of language".

2. *Creation process and the aesthetics of organization*

The photopoem illustrated in *Interlude: homage to Giò Ponti* will allow me to underline some considerations regarding creativity, negotiation process, and the aesthetic materiality of organizational life. This photopoem is a digital image that belongs to my photopoetic series of "homage to" artists like Umberto Boccioni (http://web.unitn.it/en/rucola), Niki de Saint Phalle and Gaspare Traversi (Strati 2019: 81, 167) or art photographers such as Robert Doisneau (http://www.mufoco.org/collezioni/raccolta-antologica). *Homage to Giò Ponti* consists of raw files realized with my small Leica C digital camera that a few months later I manipulated using the Adobe Lightroom and Adobe Photoshop photo software. The reader can see it in color, in the "Studi di Estetica" online, or in black and white, in the hard copy of this journal. Its aesthetic appreciation is therefore influenced by the two different photographic languages of color and black and white and, moreover, by the photographic quality of the image – high or otherwise – that both the digital environment and the typographic context are able to provide.

My photopoetic aesthetics is thus hybridized with a variety of organizational aesthetics which operate autonomously and even far behind my control. This organizational aesthetics occupy a position that is crucial for the aesthetic appreciation of *Homage to Giò Ponti*. Without them, my photopoem would not be published and the reader could not see it. What kind of aesthetics are they?

For instance, when is a color photograph printed magnificently in black and white? The aesthetic choices of the typography are largely independent of my photopoem: paper, inks, quality of the photographic image are due to the organizational negotiations of aesthetics that establish aesthetic standards in use in this organization. I have no influence on these aesthetic choices, they belong to the typography, that is, to an "organization". On the contrary, these organizational aesthetic choices have a clear influence on my photopoem which could result, for example, too grey and flat or too contrasted and bright.

Instead, I could have some influence on the aesthetic choices of the organization dedicated to the copyediting of this special issue of the journal. I can ask and negotiate that *Homage to Giò Ponti* will be printed on a full page, so that the reader can note the importance given to the visual language in the article and decide, if s/he wishes, to dedicate a moment to explore the image and aesthetically appreciate my photopoem.

Interlude: homage to Giò Ponti, 2019 (File Leica C, software Adobe Photoshop)

While I was writing this essay, I actually thought that the visual language of photography could bring concreteness and situatedness to my written words, as if it were "the tissue that lines them, sustains them, nourishes them, and which for its part is not a thing, but a possibility, a latency, and a flesh of things" (Merleau-Ponty 1964; Eng. tr. 1968: 132-3). Thus, I made *Homage to Giò Ponti* expressly for the *Interlude*. At the beginning, I considered working on the chairs painted by Vincent van Gogh – for their beauty, their texture and their ordinary context – or on the *Proust armchair* designed by Alessandro Mendini, because of the "Post-Modernist vein" (Fiell, Fiell, Rossi 2013: 198) and the transgressive baroque style. I also considered other chairs that I photographed in offices, meeting rooms, University class rooms, palaces and cathedrals. In the end, I decided for the *Superleggera, model 699* designed by Italian designer Giò Ponti and manufactured by Cassina which was launched in 1957. I found the *Superleggera* extremely elegant and light, industrial and ordinary. Its shapes evoked the black and white photographs of the last century of women who worked sitting on the street completing the chair with the woven rush. Furthermore, the *Superleggera* was in an environment that had an atmosphere, almost at the end of the "Tutto Ponti, 2019" exhibition at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris.

When I made my first attempts to digitally manipulate these photographs, I noticed that too many lines were depicting the image of the chair. I decided to soften their presence by adding new "false" lines and making the lines of the *Superleggera* chair fluid and rounded. I worked on three different shots which I then superimposed. I also desaturated one of these files and translated it into a black and white photograph, to which I added the colors of yellow, cyan and red. A long process, somehow playful, made of attempts that have had the meaning of giving form – in Pareyson's terms (Gherardi, Strati 2017) – to an image made in such a way that it can be considered as belonging to my art photography. An image, moreover, that I did not know until the end, when I said to myself "I could sign it".

Why provide the reader with these details regarding the photopoem *Homage to Giò Ponti*? My aim is to invite the reader to consider that my photopoem is not just the artifact published online or printed s/he sees, but a "process" which, as Omar Calabrese (2006: VII) points out, "inevitably constitutes the theory of itself". That is, an intrinsically organizational process of creation.

After all, it was my commitment to write an essay for "Studi di estetica" that stimulated my imagination of a visual moment, the *Interlude*. The creation process then begins in organizational terms, within an organization loosely coupled, in an "organization without walls" (Strati 1996; Eng. tr. 2000: 24-6), where (i) the desires and tastes of the organizational actors – individuals, collectivities and organizations – involved, (ii) the values, beliefs and aesthetics choices that inspire their practices and their rituals and (iii) the symbolic construction of organizational relationships prevail over the bureaucratic formalization of relations and interactions.

However, even if the creation process is situated in this specific organizational setting, it is also independent of it. Because, on the one hand, "Studi di estetica" does not require visual interludes in the essays, nor has the journal monitored the process of creating this *Interlude*. On the other hand, the creation process is also found in another organizational setting, namely the ephemeral organization of the temporary exhibition dedicated to Giò Ponti.

I felt a certain charm, in fact, in the essential and elegant way in which the *Superleggera* chair was exposed and I appreciated the atmosphere (Böhme 1993, Julmi 2017) of the scenario in which it was placed. The aesthetic choices made by the Wilmotte & Associés company with the collaboration of Italo Lupi, responsible for the scenography of the exhibition, stimulated my decision to take the pictures even though I did not have my professional photographic equipment with me. So, I moved here and there in this scenario, looking for a shot that would not violate the atmosphere I felt, nor the elegance of the essential lines of Giò Ponti's chair. I was looking for a "photographic note" of these aesthetic feelings through different shots and with different exposures depending on the lights and shadows of this ambiance. All these acts, even when they consist of light and delicate changes, are material, are corporeal, are bodily performance, as Richard Shusterman (2012) underlines. Two different corporeality – the hands / the whole body and the camera – are tidily coupled in the photographic performance aimed at creating the aesthetics of the image that I then chose in the creation process of the photopoem *Homage to Giò Ponti*.

Now, if a process of empathic knowledge is activated, and the reader puts himself/herself in my place and observes himself/herself in the exhibition while taking a picture with his/her smartphone thanks to the "imaginary participant observation" (Strati 1999: 11-8) – that is,

s/he feels the smells of furniture and artificial lights, explores the scenario with his/her eyes and his/her whole body, hears the noises s/he makes while walking here and there, listens to the voices of other visitors – s/he will notice the materiality of the performance of both his/her own body and that of his/her smartphone. And what photographs will have been taken? What in particular will have been framed? From which position? Would s/he have felt, as I felt, as if s/he had been thrown into a series of interactions with the ephemeral organization of the Parisian exhibition dedicated to Giò Ponti?

My repeated attempts to give form to the photopoem *Homage to Giò Ponti* are based on the practice of creating an artefact "with the light" that passes through the camera lens or the pinhole camera aperture without the lens. This is the fundamental aspect of taking photographs, both in the context of analogue photography and in the digital environments (Valtorta 2006: 12, Verdicchio 2018: 34) and highlights an important consideration. While the photographic film that records lights, shadows and forms – or the photographic print that shows them – does not hide the photographic industry and the chemical production of photographic layers and their plastic and/or paper supports realized in specialized companies, the digital image hides the world of organizations in which it is formed, starting from the numerical code – the series of "0s" and "1s" – which constitutes it. While the photographic film, the photographic print and the photographic slide show their materiality to be aesthetically appreciated through touch, smell and sight, what the digital image offers is only its "virtual body" which – writes Roberto Diodato (2005; Eng. tr. 2012: 1) – "constructs the coincidence" between the sequences of binary units and "their sensible appearances", which are "in general perceptible".

Now, if we consider the *Interlude* published online, who is the author of *Homage to Giò Ponti*? The art photographer who created it or the reader who watches it on the computer screen and, therefore, establishes the interaction between the hidden algorithms and his/her gaze? Certainly, the author of the photopoem is not just the art photographer. Because, in addition to the reader, even the engineers who produce the "invisible" matter of the digital image are the author of the aesthetic creation of the digital photopoem. The engineers who invented the software for the Leica C, as well as the engineers who created the Adobe software for digital image processing, as well as the engineers who realized the high quality of my laptop screen must be considered equally author of the aesthetics of the photopoem, since

their aesthetic decisions constitute the panorama of my aesthetic choices. Other professional communities – and other organizations – can be included in the authorship of the photopoem *Homage to Giò Ponti*, as the graphic designer of "Studi di estetica" online.

Although everyone – from the engineer to the graphic designer – did not create the photopoetic research which remains my particular style of doing art photography and my photographic language (Belli 1982, Valtorta 2014), their tastes (Arielli 2018), and the organizational aesthetics that they produced, hybridized my "Photopoesia", and radically transformed its author, which has to be seen more accurately in terms of "collective artist" (Strati 2019: 39-41). Seen with the lens of the collective artist, the search for the art photographer's freedom from the technological apparatuses – that Vilém Flusser (1983) emphasizes – assumes all its relevance.

3. *Design and the culture of organizational life*

The *Superleggera modello 699* is stylish furniture, it is design. My photopoem does not exalt this aspect of the chair. On the contrary, *Homage to Giò Ponti* exalts instead the ordinariness of this chair underlining its essential shape, the resonance of a fabric that could be made with poor materials and its elegance. At the same time, my photopoem does not conceal the fact that this chair is an Italian industrial design. In fact, the digital manipulation of the photographs has respected the forms, the proportions, the perspective and the colors of the photographed chair. Even the title – "homage to" – emphasizes this respectful intent.

The choice for *Interlude* of a chair that is a design creation suggests some considerations that are relevant for the study of the aesthetic dimension of organizational life. Beginning with the fact that, if everything is design, and since ever, as Stéphane Vial (2015: 8) observes with reference to the words of the Italian designer Ettore Sottsass jr., then every organizational artifact is design. This means that the technological equipment of a company is design, the computer in the office is design, the means of transport of organizational production are design, the mobile phone used to communicate internally and externally the enterprise is design, the food served at the organization's canteen is design, the atmosphere breathed into the organizational life is design. As, moreover, the nearly 600 corporate archives and museums

founded in Italy (Bulegato 2008) testify at least in terms of a growing diffusion of design culture.

However, I am not convinced that everything in the organization and in society is design. Therefore, I did not make the photopoem *Homage to Giò Ponti* willing to create a tribute to Italian design. On the other hand, I could not avoid the fact that design represents a fundamental characteristic of the *Superleggera* and to manipulate the three photographs with a clear awareness of it in order to render this aspect intrinsic to the photopoem. But in what sense was *Superleggera* design to my eyes and, moreover, how did I understand the design concept? The word "design" refers to a variety of specific artifacts and experiences. This polysemy is underlined by Vilém Flusser (1993; Eng. tr. 2007: 55) who also raises an important questioning.

In English the word *design* is both a noun and a verb (which tells one a lot about the nature of the English language). As a noun, it means – among other things – "intention", "plan", "intent", "aim", "scheme", "plot", "motif", "basic structure", all these (and other meanings) being connected with "cunning" and "deception". As a verb ("to design"), meanings include "to concoct something", "to simulate", "to draft", "to sketch", "to fashion", "to have designs on something". The word is derived from the Latin *signum*, meaning "sign", and shares the same ancient root. Thus, etymologically, *design* means "de-sign". This raises the question: how has the word *design* come to achieve its present-day significance throughout the world?

The interrogation on the significance that design has reached all over the world that Flusser poses highlights how art and aesthetics are widespread in contemporary society thanks also to the pervasiveness of organizations in our contemporary society. We actually live in a society in which "organizational life" is more than just the context of our daily work, it is a mentality, it is a culture, it is the predominant style of relationships and interactivity. Design is there, in the culture of organizational life, and has reached its "present-day significance" along with the diffusion of this culture, that is, together with the present-day significance achieved by organizational aesthetics.

Design, in English, Flusser writes, can be a noun or a verb. For me, during the creation process of the photopoem, design was essentially an adjective that had the important symbolic value of aesthetic appreciation of an "art"-fact. A very modest significance, instead, could have assumed the assertion that *Superleggera* is "plan", is "intent", is "basic structure", to remain in the Flusser's polysemy of design. In my eyes,

the adjective design adds an "aura" of art to processes, events and artifacts to be appreciated aesthetically in the organizational contexts and in society. We live in societies where the processes of artification (Shapiro, Heinich 2012) develop at the same time that design becomes more and more pervasive. The sphere of art has in fact expanded its boundaries and what now is happening "is an epistemological change of the notion of art", despite the fact that the sociology of art "has dispelled time ago the myth of the essence of art", notes Mario Perniola (2015: 36, 34).

If we return to the words of Georg Simmel a century ago, the radical change in the social imagery, in the mentality, in the cultural attitude towards artifacts and experiences is remarkable. Surely, as Simmel (1908b; It. tr. 2006: 92-3) stressed, we do not sit on a chair that is a work of art, like those exhibited in museums, because it would be an act of cannibalism to use the works of art for our daily practices. But we can sit in a chair, like the *Superleggera*, which is design. The "culture of organizational life" that pervades our contemporary societies invites us to live in a landscape of artifacts and experiences that symbolize the spread and the influence of art, design and aesthetics in our daily working life, in our leisure time and in our private worlds.

So, while we are sitting on a chair that is design – from the international trends of rationalist design (De Fusco 2002) to the Italian radical, postmodern, and anti-design (Fiell, Fiell, Rossi 2013) –, while we appreciate the aesthetics of this design at work, in a restaurant, in a hotel or at home, we can sense how blurred the distinction between art and design is. We can feel the "loss of identity of art" which is "no longer the exclusive epicenter of the elaboration of taste", as Andrea Mecacci (2012: 10) underlines inviting us to take in due consideration the new path that is outlined by the aesthetics of design.

The attribution of the aesthetic quality of design, however, is not something self-evident, nor something absolute, as we shall see in the following considerations that Matteo Vercelloni makes with reference to the *Superleggera*. Vercelloni (2008: 103) writes that Giò Ponti "with the chair *Superleggera* combines modernity and tradition in the re-reading of the traditional Chiavari chair (a timeless model dating back to the past centuries), 'redesigned' with the same overall lightness, but paying attention to the experience of Nordic furniture combined with the graphic expression of black and white". These words support my way of seeing the *Superleggera* chair, and even more so does the following point that Vercelloni (2008: 13) makes: maybe that "we are not

talking about design thinking of the *Chiavarina* chair (the elegant wooden chair with a fine woven straw seat, still produced in Chiavari, in Liguria)? A piece that has remained unchanged since its inception in the 18th century, a reference model for Giò Ponti and his *Superleggera*". Design becomes design through the negotiation processes of aesthetics that see organizations, professional communities, and the user communities deeply engaged.

4. *The riddle, the chair and the organizational theory*

But, could the reader ask, why all this attention to a chair? Because of a riddle. During my teaching sociology of organizations at the Universities of Trento and Siena, and in other European Universities, whenever I felt it appropriate, I proposed a riddle.

Usually, the proposal of a riddle has changed the atmosphere experienced in class: most of the students laughed and appreciated the idea. Although there have always been students who, on the contrary, have shown their disappointment at what they have seen only as a recreational moment and a waste of their learning time, the classroom has taken on another aspect. There were students who changed places and joined other favorite students with whom to solve the riddle, there were noises, they called each other, they laughed and chatted and gave shape to a new ephemeral setting of the class and to the different material structure of our organizational life.

Once, after a few minutes, calm and silence returned to the reshaped classroom, I explained that the riddle concerned the notion of "organizational artifact". I reminded them that in the sociology of organization and in organizational theory the polysemy of this concept goes from organizational products to organization *tout court*, to something that can be essential or marginal, ephemeral or lasting, physical or impalpable. What is important for the riddle is to consider the organizational artefact in a broad sense and paying attention to the fact that the artefact reveals specific characteristics of the organization. Thus, I gave an envelope with the answer to the riddle to one of the students and I projected on the wall a transparency or a Power Point slide with the 10 requirements of the riddle (see the following figure).

> **Which organizational artefact in the broad sense:**
>
> 1. is purchased more often than it is produced
> 2. goes beyond organizational boundaries
> 3. is simultaneously material and non-material
> 4. is individual and belongs to everybody
> 5. shows up anyone who does not have one
> 6. is constantly sought after
> 7. is a metaphor for the hierarchy of organizational levels
> 8. if flaunted may provoke criticism and invoke sanctions
> 9. if it shifts, may provoke hilarity
> 10. homogenizes positions downwards
>
> **?**

The riddle of the organizational artefact

The reader will note that these ten requirements highlight the interrelationships between organizations, the sentiments of organizational citizenship, the organizational discrimination and marginalization, the power relationship, as well as the aesthetics, taste and style that pervade the organizational life. S/he will also note that the last two requirements underline the aesthetic materiality of the organization and the importance of detail (Merleau-Ponty, 2002; Eng. tr. 2004: 70-1) in the study of organization.

But the students' answers were almost exclusively delimited within the theoretical framework of the "grand categories" of the study of the organization: "money", "competence", "power", "dominion", "emotion", "culture". Thus, when the student who had the envelope with the correct answer opened it and read – sometimes laughing – that it was simply the "chair", the playfulness of organizational life in the reshaped classroom reached its best. For the students who had wanted to participate – and the teacher –, learning sociology of organization and organizational theory was taking place thanks to the aesthetic dimension of the learning practices of the newly shaped classroom. "Practices", writes Silvia Gherardi (2019: 156),

are socially sustained – and constituted – through situated ways of learning the criteria for appraising, and situated ways of transmitting them, and taste-making is an important activity in working practices for two main reasons:
- it makes evident and supports a conception of what constitutes a practice not on the basis of the activities that compose it, but instead on the basis of

its being socially sustained through criteria of normative adequacy endlessly discussed among the practitioners.
- The constant negotiation of the aesthetic and ethical judgements on what is thought to be a correct or incorrect way of practising within the community of its practitioners makes possible the competent reproduction of a practice over and over again, and its refinement while being practised, or its abandonment. Refinement of a practice constitutes the specific endogenous dynamics of practice change.

The playfulness of experiential learning ("Organization Studies" 2018) stimulated with the riddle of the organizational artefact was appropriate to emphasize that the sociology of organization and organizational theories do not consist only of "grand categories" and that the aesthetic materiality of the chair can tell about the characteristics of the organizational life in which is in-use.

Generally, I have illustrated and discussed with the students every single requirement (Strati 1999: 22-41), also because the students have usually negotiated the correctness of their answers. Here, I will emphasize only that the chair sheds light on how deeply the organizational aesthetics has permeated everyday life in our contemporary societies. It is very difficult, in fact, in our contemporary societies, to describe our daily working and non-working lives without referring to a plurality of organizations interacting between them also through their organizational aesthetics.

The aesthetic dimension of organization has been studied with "philosophical sensibility" in the organizational aesthetics research. I use this concept – philosophical sensibility – because it sounds to me more respectful of the ways in which philosophy has become part of the aesthetic discourse on organization. Philosophical sensibility is aimed at underlining the hybridization of the field of organization studies with the aesthetic philosophies, and evokes the fragmented and unfinished dialogue between sociology of organization, organizational theory and management studies, on the one hand, and aesthetic philosophies on the other.

This is not to affirm that all the literature on organizational aesthetics is crossed by philosophy. Most of this literature makes no substantial references to philosophical study and research, but is limited to ritual citations that often concern *maîtres à penser* of French theory and American pragmatism. A part of the literature on organizational aesthetics, instead, is engaged in the philosophical exploration of the

aesthetic discourse on organization. In this last case we find then three philosophical sensibilities intertwined in different measure:

- the widely used *hermeneutic philosophical sensibility*, with reference principally to Gadamer, Lotman, Barthes, Eco – and Pareyson – in order to underline the interpretative character of the aesthetic discourse of organization, and the process of creation of meaning that also involves the user interpretation.

- The *aesthetic philosophical sensibility*, which has its roots in European philosophies of the eighteenth century – Addison, Vico, Baumgarten, Kant –, in the aesthetic sociology of Simmel, in the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, in Pareyson's theory of aesthetics as formativeness and its emphasis on practice, in the post-humanist aesthetics which avoids anthropocentrism.

- The *performative philosophical sensibility*, which has its roots in the American philosophies of Dewey's pragmatism and Shusterman's som-aesthetics, but also of European philosophy with Polanyi's theory of personal knowledge.

These three philosophical sensibilities are clearly different from one another. However, they do not circumscribe the organizational aesthetics research in three corresponding areas. On the contrary, they all influence the whole aesthetic discourse on the organization. With different relevance of each of them, however, as regards the four approaches in which the organizational aesthetics research is articulated.

For the *archaeological approach* (Berg, Kreiner 1990), the *hermeneutic philosophical sensibility* is particularly important. This approach considers the aesthetic dimension as an integral part of the symbolic construction of organizations as cultures. The other two philosophical sensibilities, aesthetic and performative, have a very minor importance in the archaeological approach that has the merit of being the first theorization of the study of the aesthetics of organization through its image and artefacts ("Dragon, the Journal of SCOS" 1987, Gagliardi 1990). By adopting this approach to the study of organization, the researcher assumes the guise of an archaeologist or a social historian of art who investigates aesthetics to grasp organizational cultures and symbols. This approach is in fact deeply rooted in its origins within the organizational symbolism approach to the study of organization.

For the *empathic-logical approach* (Gagliardi 2006), the *hermeneutic philosophical sensibility* has more importance than the aesthetic

and performative philosophical sensibilities. The empathic-logical approach investigates the aesthetic and pre-cognitive influence of the organizational artifacts, with the aim also of identifying the forms of organizational control enacted (Gagliardi 1990). This approach has the merit of having theorized the study of the aesthetic side of organization as an autonomous research style. With this approach the researcher seeks both empathic and logico-analytic understanding of organization, along a process that begins with the empathic immersion in the organizational context and ends by logically examining the results of the research. The research process is therefore structured in three phases: observation, interpretation and communication of the findings of the research study.

For the *aesthetic approach* (Strati 2019), the *aesthetic philosophical sensibility* constitutes a foundation for its phenomenological and post-humanist organizational investigation. The aesthetic approach studies the forms of social negotiation of aesthetics in the quotidian practices in organization and is characterized by the following key dimensions: sensorial knowing, aesthetic judging and poetic performing. This approach has the merit of having proposed the transition from the study of organizational aesthetics to the aesthetic understanding of organizational life ("Academy of Management Review" 1992, Strati 1999). The hermeneutic and the performative philosophical sensibilities are also very important for this approach which has been in constant dialogue with the artistic approach ("Human Relations" 2002, King, Vickery 2013) described below. In this approach the researcher uses the empathic-aesthetic understanding to obtain aesthetic-intuitive information, critically reflects on this immersive process of gathering organizational knowledge, communicates the results of the research as an "open text" aimed at stimulating a process of aesthetic and evocative knowing.

For the *artistic approach* (Guillet de Monthoux 2004), the *performative philosophical sensibility* is fundamental to explore the creativity, playfulness and organizational performance of the experiential flux of managing the organization. This approach investigates the artistic experience in order to obtain insights for the management of organizational processes inside and outside the art world. Both the hermeneutic and the aesthetic philosophical sensibilities are important in this approach which has the merit of having brought the theorizations on art practices and art research into management studies and organ-

izational theory and to have enriched the academic study with the theoretical reflections of the professionals of the art (Barry, Hansen 2008, "Organization Studies" 2018, Taylor, Ladkin 2009).

These four approaches outline research styles of organizational aesthetics that are different but that are in strong communication with each other. Thus, we can find research studies in which the artistic approach is adopted together with the aesthetic approach, or the empathic-logical approach adopted together with the archaeological approach, or even other more complex hybridizations. Furthermore, all four approaches are strongly critical against aesthetic anesthetization due to the embellishment of organizational processes, experiences and atmospheres, as well as of the aesthetic manipulation and exploitation of people at work, animals and the ecological environment.

What these four approaches envisage is, in fact, to highlight the aesthetic characteristics of the new forms of "organizational citizenship" which underline, in controversy against the process of globalizing massification, the right to difference as the foundation of social equality. These characteristics emerge in the inequality of the power relations within the organization thanks to the aesthetic investigation of how people experience aesthetically their working life. That is, through the aesthetic study of taste, passion, talent and desire that animate organizational interactions, which are not merely mental and logical and rational, but rooted, instead, in the corporeality of sensible knowledge and in the materiality of organizational life.

5. *Conclusions*

In this article, I illustrated the area of organizational aesthetics research which, together with other new approaches to the study of organization formed in the 1980s, configured the sociology of organization, organizational theories and management studies in a new way. Four approaches articulate this new intellectual current in organization studies – the *archaeological approach*, the *empathic-logical approach*, the *aesthetic approach*, and the *artistic approach* – and three philosophical sensibilities – *hermeneutic*, *aesthetic* and *performative* – characterize the methods of study and the theoretical reflections conducted to construct the aesthetic discourse on organization.

I have emphasized that the aesthetic discourse on organization is characterized by its criticism against the aestheticization that anesthetizes our life in organizational contexts and society. I also critically outlined the connections in action between aesthetics and organization in the creation process in art photography and I suggested that the diffusion of design is intertwined with the pervasiveness of the "culture of organizational life" in contemporary societies. I have shown, with reference to the photopoem *Homage to Giò Ponti*, the criticisms of the aesthetic discourse on organization against the conventional methods of the study of organization. With the case of the riddle and the chair I have problematized the domain of rational interpretations in the learning practices of the sociology of organizations and of organizational theory.

The aesthetic discourse on organization represents a critical European contribution to the field of organization studies and counteracts the fact that, instead, the sociology of organization, the theory of organization and the management studies are substantially influenced by the American thought. This European intellectual current took place in the context of the epistemological debate that characterized the Cultural Turn in organization studies and social theory. This means that the area of organizational aesthetics research took form in the midst of epistemological polemics against the dominance of the rationalist and positivistic paradigm in the sociology of organization, the organizational theories and management studies, as well as in the social sciences more generally. Thus, the aesthetic discourse on organization has been configured with a clear interest in the philosophy and epistemology of organizational theory, and still maintains this characteristic. A feature that is not generalized in the complex of organizational studies (Mir, Willmott, Greenwood 2016), where the image of tiresome abstraction and irrelevance of philosophy influences a significant part of research and theorization.

However, despite the search for philosophical aesthetics within the organizational aesthetics research, aesthetic philosophies have shown scarce attention and little interest in the aesthetic discourse on organization. Therefore, I like to put an end to these conclusions by encouraging scholars and students of aesthetic philosophies "to play" with organizational theories, management studies and the sociology of organization, just as organizational scholars are doing with aesthetic philosophies.

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