

Art performance as research, friction and deed

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Abstract. To extend and enrich the debate on critical performativity, this paper proposes that critical management studies should create a strategic link with organisational aesthetics through an alliance with critical artists doing interventions in organisations. These artists produce social change at the margin of organisations and our task as critical researchers is to give a voice to their artistic action in the field of management. Art performance is presented as a research method and a political action able to give critical performativity a new impulse. Two dance performances in a bank are described and analysed: while the first one is a failure the second produces confusion and embodied tension in the bank's lounges. The aesthetic tactics used in this art performance are counter-performative: dancers introduce slowness and hesitation of bodies in a context of extreme closure and discipline. Art performance is described as a deed: its only value is that it could be done, which calls for more artistic action in corporate everyday life.

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INTRODUCTION

The debate on critical performativity is a good opportunity to confront the concept of performance in the field of management to its meaning in the field of arts. While an artist doing a performance realises something outstanding and daring a manager intends performance as productivity that can be measured and improved. While it is an action on one side it is a system of productive routines on the other. Performing in arts means putting the body at stake in an experiment or a show. If a manager sees a link to the body in the notion of performance it would probably be through sports and its different performance measures. The present paper claims that performance intended as embodied artistic action can give critical scholars new ideas for meaningful interventions in organisations.

Performativity in management studies has mainly been associated with language: speech acts are words that perform something in reality, typically "I pronounce you husband and wife"; by extension scholars have concentrated on management tools or economical models' performativity (Muniesa & Callon, 2008). The embodied and material aspects of performativity, the bride's behaviour, the space, the gestures the priest performs for the ceremony to have an effect, the whole materiality of the situations in which performativity occurs have been left to the field of performance studies (Schechner, 1988). Still some scholars have described managers as performers in a show (Biehl-Missal, 2011) or project managers as subversive performers of a parody (Hodgson, 2005); time is consequently ripe to dig more into the critical aspects of performing bodies. The present empirical paper will investigate how an art

performance can create social change at the margin of an organisation. In this sense art performance is counter-performative: it aims at slowing down the economy by creating interruptions in organisational reality.

Art performances usually occur in museums, art galleries or private evenings; they take place during openings and then become videos to be watched as traces. A performance is planned for a specific context and relies on many different techniques (voice, gestures, props, technology); it is often announced to the public who consequently knows how to behave. There are many codes and routines for these events in the field of contemporary arts where they have existed since the 1960s. The art performance this paper deals with can be described as a happening (Kaprow, 1993): its context is unusual (a bank), it was carefully planned by a group of artists but not announced to employees, its public consequently does not know how to behave. It is a social experiment and will be described as research, friction between bodies and logics and deed intended as extraordinary collective action. The happening is critique physically taking place, which can be opposed to critique using discursive means. It is thus very well adapted to explore the embodied and material aspects of critical performativity.

The paper is organised as follows. The debate on critical performativity is briefly presented and contextualized as a problem critical management studies (CMS) faces since its infancy: how can critique become affirmative? CMS should look for new allies, a new visibility in social sciences and a clearer definition around core ideas as equality or emancipation. It is proposed that CMS should make a strategic alliance with organisational aesthetics (OA), a group of scholars who have common political preoccupations. OA can offer three main aspects to CMS: new theoretical tools from philosophy of art, a methodology of intervention inspired from art performance and an opening of the field to critical artists and their publics who could contribute to give CMS a wider resonance in society. Critical artists operating in organisational contexts offer new opportunities of meaningful research for critical scholars. Art performance is then presented both as artistic action and research methodology, opening up for the description of the case: the practice of art performance in a financial institution.

The empirical material is presented as a funnel: the reader enters the bank and its global art collection to end up with Virginie Masson working as a publisher in the Paris office while planning art performances to shake the bankers. Two specific art performances linked to dance and gestures are then described and the reader now follows the dancer Stéphanie Auberville's artistic action in the bank with her collective of friends. The happening in the bank's lounges in 2013 is described as the most successful event leading to collective agency and joy, embodied critique, physical tension and new possibilities of political action. Critical artists' aesthetic tactics of slowness, occupation and focus on gestures are detailed as examples of powerful embodied critique.

EXTENDING THE DEBATE ON CRITICAL PERFORMATIVITY

We have lately witnessed a fruitful but slightly destructive debate about the nature of performativity in critical management studies (henceforth called CMS) leading to one clan of authors (Spicer, Alvesson, & Karreman, 2009) feeling aggressed by another (Cabantous, Gond, Harding, & Learmonth, 2016) and consequently counter-attacking,

accusing them of “*author-itarian theoretical policing*” (Spicer, Alvesson, & Kärreman, 2016). The aim of the present paper is not to contribute with another exegesis of Butler or Callon but to suggest that the practice of art performance in organisational contexts can enrich and extend the concept of critical performativity.

The question that CMS authors deal with is in fact an old one: what is the position of the intellectual in society? How could our knowledge about management and organisations contribute to change the world? How could one be critical and perform something at the same time? Which aspects of critique could become productive?

The debate began with the proposition that CMS has a non-performative intent, in the sense that the knowledge produced should be of an entirely different nature compared to scientific management (Fournier & Grey, 2000). Critical researchers should deconstruct, denaturalize, demystify management, managerialism and its cult of efficiency and productivity. “CMS questions the alignment between knowledge, truth and efficiency and is concerned with performativity only in that it seeks to uncover what is being done in its name” (2000: 17). The idea of performance (productivity) at the core of management science has recently been questioned: human resource management needs to rethink performance beyond its focus on economical results (Janssens & Steyaert, 2009), strategy also needs to extend the concept of performance (Guérard, Langley, & Seidl, 2013: 574) : “performance should be seen as something people do, rather than something that organisations have”. Indeed, as this study will show, the concept of performance has a strong link to embodied action.

Unfortunately the research produced in the last 40 years by three generations of CMS scholars remains largely unknown to most practitioners and organisations. It is still hard to explain to our students or to persons outside our field that management is not necessarily dedicated to productivity or profit, which in the end is a problem of legitimacy of CMS. We definitely need to look for new allies in all different worlds we interact with: organisations we study, students we teach, colleagues from other disciplines at the university and the wider civil society through our interaction with media, culture, politicians or social movements. CMS needs a new visibility in social science, which could in turn attract more diverse people into management studies. The call for a public sociology, which aims at regenerating sociology’s moral fibre, has already been mentioned as a model (Fleming & Banerjee 2015). CMS scholars could begin to unite in the writing of a manifesto against managerialism; this would give “the big tent” a personality in the eyes of other social sciences. As we are governed by a regime that is hostile to the very idea of society sociologists declare that their work is to defend civil society and the social, to create human categories with their collaboration, to turn private troubles into public issues (Burawoy, 2005). In a similar way CMS should clarify its core ideas of equality and emancipation and define a research agenda, which would construct a stronger link to sociology, history, philosophy, theology or art, in short all traditional disciplines of social science. Presently management appears to be very much in conflict with itself, it is somehow caught in a master-slave relationship with mainstream and critical scholars ignoring each other’s work. Perhaps management’s strong position in society is about to end; scholars can feel this fragility and consequently try to preserve their position at all costs, which only reinforces the lack of engagement of the discipline.

We argue that CMS scholars need to take more risks, to have more courage and to unite behind a common cause. CMS is no longer an

occupation for some extravagant scholars at the margins of management like it may have been in the 80s; it is an important international community that has all means to blossom and find common grounds for action, one example being the field of “business ethics” (Prasad & Mills, 2010). It is now perhaps more important to open up the field to new actors than to “expose and reverse the work of mainstream management” (Fournier & Grey, 2000). We have to find new ways to become affirmative and take part in real acts of resistance that do have a cost (Contu, 2008).

One way to do this would be to show more interest for what is happening at the margins of organisations, which would entail to stop focus only on managers and core professions. Looking at organising as a process has already opened up for a lot of interesting research beyond formal organisations. Furthermore scholars have insisted on the value of creating more playful forms of understanding and listening to alternative ways of knowing (P.S Adler, Forbes, & Willmott, 2007); it is here that art comes in, art both as a form of knowledge and as a specific form of action. As language only has a limited impact on social change (Fleming & Banerjee, 2015) and the material and embodied dimensions of performativity have not been fully addressed (Cabantous et al. 2016: 202), we suggest that artistic action at the fringe of organisations can bring critical performativity the fresh air it is looking for.

CREATING A STRATEGIC LINK WITH ORGANISATIONAL AESTHETICS AND CRITICAL ARTISTS

The relationship between CMS scholars and the school of organisational aesthetics (henceforth called OA) has not been the best in the last decades, which is sad given they may have some common political preoccupations. OA can offer three main aspects to CMS: theoretical tools that stem from a good understanding of philosophy of art (or *aesthetics* as it has often been called but I avoid the term here because I give it another meaning - see below), a methodology of intervention inspired from art performance (see method part) and an opening of the field to critical artists and their publics who could contribute to give CMS a wider resonance in society.

Before we detail these three aspects further it is necessary to briefly present the field of organisational aesthetics or arts and management as it is also called (Meisiek & Barry, 2014). Since the early 90s OA has contributed to describe workplaces and organising processes in brand new ways, often in close relation with employees and their feelings about their organisations. Long before the “socio-material turn” the material and embodied aspects have been central: organisations are first and foremost spaces in which bodies interact and feel. The founders of the field and their pioneering work (Strati & Guillet de Montoux, 2002) have made possible a whole range of new research within organisations studies (Taylor & Hansen, 2005), from philosophical approaches to the dark side of organising (Sørensen, 2014) to the analysis of the uncanny (Beyes & Steyaert, 2013), the disgusting (Pelzer, 2002) or even monstrous aspects of organisations (T Thanem, 2006). Artistic interventions in businesses that can help to “see more and see differently” (Barry & Meisiek, 2010) have also gained a new visibility, even if it has been difficult to establish their effect and consequently their value for businesses (Berthoin-Antal, 2012). Even more mainstream and established scholars have shown a great interest in art and management’s alliance (N. J. Adler, 2006). Still OA remains a somewhat marginalised field, facing similar problems to CMS and mainly a lack of integration of scholars who appear to act in disparate

worlds. The problem could be that art - as phenomena - and philosophy of art - as theory - are not easy to agree on: each one of us has his/her personal approach making it difficult to build milestones on a road to a common cause. Consequently what CMS could bring OA is a better understanding of the political and critical potential in the production and consumption of contemporary art.

From a philosophical point of view understanding the aesthetic on which the organisation stands can help to deconstruct it and bring about new ideas, both utopian fantasies and pragmatic solutions for social change. A lot of the “bullshit talk” and “business as usual” has an aesthetic explanation; employees and managers act in accordance with their senses and their habits without questioning too much of the reality they are part of. The working contracts, the lived and planned spaces, the production of documents, the rules and norms, the manners and demeanour are all part of an aesthetical arrangement (*partage du sensible*) (Rancière, 2000) that people dwell in and perhaps also cling on to, both in actions of loyalty and opposition. Since the situation cannot be redefined everyday its apparent normality gives an impression of stability and security in an otherwise uncertain world. Only in some specific situations does the organisation appear to the individual, for example in a yearly event, a contract negotiation or an individual evaluation. What is sensible, that is what can be seen, heard, felt and consequently also thought and done varies a great deal from organisation to organisation. And this is exactly where OA and its aesthetic tactics can contribute to CMS: aesthetic tactics can disturb accepted patterns of what is considered to be sensible. Critical scholars (Huault, Perret, & Spicer, 2014), art historians (Bishop, 2012) and political activists (McKee, 2016) have all underlined the great contribution of Jacques Rancière’s philosophy to think and practice the link between art and politics. His concept of aesthetics as “that which is sensible” is very useful to understand how individual emotions and organisational control are intertwined and consequently to reach a better understanding of CMS themes as emancipation, resistance and political action.

The present paper will explore an independent artistic intervention and claim that the critical researcher could gain great insights from collaboration with critical artists. Artists are often at the edge of innovation in terms of lifestyle, resistance to norms and creation of meaning (Schein, 2001). They act as social entrepreneurs, aesthetic consultants, activists or simply entrepreneurs of themselves; indeed the artist has been described as a model for the new flexible worker (Menger, 2003). Many artists have a background in social sciences and consequently a rich conceptual approach to the critical practice of art in society. Even if some ‘corporate artists’ only add another layer of illusion to organisational reality, critical artists work to produce some kind of social change. The problem with contemporary art has been that it is intellectually demanding and can bring great levels of unease; the CMS scholar who is familiar with similar theoretical tools could act as a facilitator of artistic action in organisations. Of course this also means facing the risk to loose credibility in academia, where art is often considered as mere entertainment. Although the researcher does not need to be an artist to understand the critical potential of art, s/he must put all senses to contribution and the whole body at stake. This means s/he must rely on visual and sensible research processes that are still considered unconventional in a world where scientific legitimacy derives mainly from identifiable methodologies. As experimental art questions our perception of reality, there is no such thing as objectivity in the practice and interpretation of an artwork.

INTRODUCING ART PERFORMANCE AS DEED

Butler's reflection on individual agency and resistance to norms is central in the debate on critical performativity. Many authors have produced insightful explanations of Butler's work (Clarke, 2000; McKinlay, 2010; Nentwich, Ozbilgin, & Tatli, 2015) but something is still lacking. It seems that when reflecting on performativity CMS scholars have not fully taken into consideration the critical potential of performing arts in organisational contexts, even if dramaturgical analyses of organisational reality have paved the way for such approaches. In fact managers at large-scale events do not 'play' or 'act', but 'perform', they are performers making use of genuine theatre techniques such as bright lighting and carefully designed settings and creating an aesthetic experience (Biehl-Missal, 2011). The author points at corporate events' internal potential for mockery or resistance; they are indeed fragile constructions and a simple gesture, not necessarily conscious or intentional, could put them at risk, showing their superficiality and introducing new fantasies into reality. The focus is on counter-performativity and the way doubts are produced in reality, the repetition of daily performances opening up for possibilities of change in a profession or an organisation (Hodgson, 2005). A bank for example is not only made of financial instruments and management discourses but also of bodies who dress up in a certain way, of hands who perform various gestures and of smiles who agree on contracts, all this generally happening in a nice building. Critical artists tend to point at specific aspects of organising that actors do not necessarily think about, in the case presented below the embodied aspects of the banking profession.

An art performance can be described as an embodied action aimed at questioning a specific situation considered to be reality (my tentative definition). Contemporary artworks stemming from the performance tradition of the 1960s often use simple means to reveal how artificial our gestures could be and thus deconstruct whole parts of reality (Formis, 2010). In fact the practice has much in common with one of the first meanings of the word performance: an outstanding action, a deed. It is a bit surprising to discover that the meaning of the word performance is linked to efficiency in both fields of art and management, which makes a theoretical dialogue fully possible (Reinhold & Sanaâ, 2016). What is important for an artist during a performance is that it has an effect on the audience: something, even if it is of a very unclear nature, happens. People stay or leave, participate or not, show affects, be it attraction or repulsion. Drawing on Rancière an art historian states: "the undecidability of aesthetic experience implies a questioning of how the world is organised, and therefore the possibility of changing and redistributing the same world" (Bishop, 2012: 27).

As art performance refuses any other definition than "live art made by artists" (Goldberg, 1979) the best way to catch a glimpse of it is to bear in mind famous actions by Joseph Beuys, Marina Abramovic or Vito Acconci. Explaining art to a dead hare, slapping each other in the face until exhaustion, masturbating under a gallery floor, to name just a few of these singular acts that leave behind them a troubling wake. If talking is doing (for example declaring a war) then showing or acting has another intensity and realises something different from words. Performance studies give a particular attention to the 'showing by doing' specific to live arts (Schechner, 1988). Art performance in organisational contexts thus seems very adapted to understand the embodied and material aspects of performativity.

METHOD: ART PERFORMANCE AS ACTION-RESEARCH

Art interventions have taken place in corporations since the 1970s, in fact a number of artists could easily be classified as experimental action-researchers dealing with the re-definition of reality with for and by employees. Like action-research art interventions are both practical (artists must find ways to physically engage people in their art) and utopian (they help bring forth a very different kind of world). In fact the action-researcher like the critical artist works without pre-established rules and is driven by democratic ideals (Reason, 2006). By embracing “the politics of the possible” there are multiple possibilities for critical scholars to engage in practice and struggle alongside others to generate alternative ways of living and working (King, 2015). Furthermore Muniesa (2014) notes that performance art, happenings and the dissolution of the fourth wall in theatre and experimental methods in the social science as group therapy and psychodrama appeared in the same social contexts and period (mainly USA in the 1960s). Performance artists in fact put a working context at risk by revealing its dominating interaction norms; this was already the case with ethnomethodology and its breaching experiments, which disturbed a line of people or cars to better understand how social norms work (Garfinkel, 1967). Although ephemeral and often interpreted as mere recreation, art performances point at important aspects of organisational life. They create an embodied knowledge about organisations that becomes a very original material for the critical researcher to analyse.

The material that will be analysed in this paper is the result of an art intervention in an investment bank located in Paris. The study took place between 2011 and 2013 and was used as single-case study for a doctoral dissertation. A group of independent artists were in residence in the bank for several months and created two performances out of their work with employees. Their project was focused on the study of gestures, in an attempt to increase embodied presence and counter a hostile and cold atmosphere at work. I followed their action as an independent researcher from their arrival in the bank until their last action, which was a happening. The collected data mainly takes three different forms: observations (20 full days) of several moments including work, artistic work and lunches, 34 interviews with participating and non-participating employees and visual data mainly collected by the artists (750 pictures and a video). As the theme of the thesis was the body’s organisation, my focus was on the observation of physical behaviour and interactions. The present article results from the direct observation of two art performances that will be contrasted: a failed attempt to make bankers dance and a more successful buffet-conference-dance.

Observing an art performance in an exhaustive way is not an easy task, especially when it is scattered in several rooms and builds on various media. Human perception is limited and it is impossible to fully register or understand embodied interactions. In this sense the video an artist made of the happening was very useful to point at unseen gestures, as were also discussions with artists and employees after the events and the analysis of the few pictures I made myself. My relation with the artists has undergone various stages, from distance to engagement to a new kind of distance. My familiarity with the art world surely made it easier to understand their gestures and motivations. Although I never intervened in the artists’ plots the employees identified me as their friend, which gave me an intermediate position, somewhere between the artists and the employees. As the person in charge of the art performances can be described as an internal activist (Wickert & Schaefer, 2015) both the artists and myself were tinted by her

great engagement. Even if we had our own interests we were also helping her to advance her cause: giving a voice to back office workers through the practice of art. Given this complex situation involving an organisation and its professions, an internal activist, several artists and a researcher, the results are ambiguous and hard to apply to another context.

CONTEXT: HOW ART PERFORMANCE COMES INTO AN INVESTMENT BANK

The Parisian offices of a conservative and prestigious multinational investment bank, henceforth called La Banque d’Affaires, are located in one of the most luxurious squares of the city. The building is classified as *monument historique* and was bought by the bank in 1916. It has a series of beautiful lounges to receive clients at the first floor, all of them preserved in their original neoclassical style, which means very high ceilings with mythological scenes, golden decorations, large mirrors and wooden parquet floor, which one employee comments as “we are just part of the décor”. The 220 employees work in five different departments (private banking, investment banking, corporate banking, asset management and financial markets) assisted by various transversal functions (human resources, accounting, legal support and computer services). Other services, like the two restaurants, the reception or the mail department, have been externalised. In the 1980s the offices had about 800 employees but today Paris is considered a small office dealing with a small market; as such it has little agency at the global level. All different departments report to other offices in Europe: Zürich, Geneva, London. The bank has about 260 000 employees in more than 60 countries, with headquarters in New York. It has a huge art collection (30 000 pieces), parts of which were shown at the Paris Photo art fair in the last years. One single person assisted by a team of five is responsible for the collection’s management and development. She says the bank has become so big since 2000 it is difficult to organize artistic internal events related to the collection. Created by a managing director in 1959, the collection is now defined as portable and flexible, without any specific thematic orientation. It is limited to traditional two and three-dimensional works. The artworks are exhibited in the 450 offices of the bank worldwide. Paintings, photographs and sculptures both stimulate employees and represent the bank in front of clients, but very few artworks have been committed, which means La Banque d’Affaires does not usually interact with living artists.

That is why the local phenomenon I will analyse seems particularly interesting. Virginie Masson, a back office employee working as a graphic designer (technician) in the investment bank has started an art project with her colleagues from the works council. She was elected in 2007 with four other persons to represent employees at negotiations with the Paris management team. The works council is obligatory in France for all firms employing more than 200 people, but bankers and managers sticking to American rules tend to ignore it. Its role is mainly to defend employees’ interests, for example in case of layoffs or negotiation of working contracts. It is thus highly appreciated by back office employees who need to defend their rights. Masson is passionate about relational art and street art; she firmly believes that art can bring about some kind of social change, in our case create better relations between bankers and support professions and perhaps even a cultural change in the bank. She was educated as a visual artist at the fine arts school in Mulhouse and practices both dance and music during her free time. Since she cannot work in her studio full time anymore her idea is to use her workplace both as a place for aesthetic

experiments and as an audience. She labels her project *Art & Entreprise*, underlying the apparent contradiction between art and business; she thus follows the trend of integrating art into business in the name of creativity. The plan is to make one collaborative art project each year with an annual budget of 5000 euros, which means much voluntary work, both for her, the works council and the artists. Having hardly anything in common with financial professions (education, social extraction, interests) Masson has an awkward profile in the bank; she is highly appreciated by a core of persons while ignored and even mocked by others.

In 2008 she invited a performance group called les Mirettes to perform during lunchtime. This event can be considered as her artistic 'coming out' as she herself participates as a performing artist. Dressed in fluorescent red wigs, skirts and shoes five women take uncomfortable positions in the canteen, either lying on the table or lying on the ground, in a perfect immobility. The atmosphere during lunch is usually very serious; employees stick to formal behaviour and talk mostly about work in small groups reflecting the strict division between departments. Interviews and observations have shown that red is a prohibited colour and that it is better to stick to the dress code if you want to make a career. Bodies appear very similar: sober colours, classic style and only some individuals who adopt a more fluctuating style that is not discernable to an outsider at first glance. The banker is usually a young white man dressed in a dark suit, always in perfect control of his body; trust in La Banque d'Affaires comes partly from the homogeneity and closure of bodies. The performing women thus create great astonishment; as a matter of fact it must have been difficult as an employee not to take a position. While some employees went to the lounges after lunch to take pictures of themselves with the five Mirettes, others remained stoned and did not show any reaction. Still the event is a success as it contributes to put bankers out of their zone of comfort, challenging their normal behaviour. Masson's action soon got sponsored by the financial director who interpreted it as a way to "shake bankers" through a new form of art. The director refers to their classical tastes and their consumption of opera, classical music and painting exhibitions. Performance art appears innovative in such a context. Furthermore it introduces new issues as emotions, gestures and embodiment in a world dominated by financial instruments, deals and clients. The director sees the potential of the project in Masson's artistic engagement, cultural difference and boldness. She has always reported positively on her actions; in her words the bank highly values "what is above and beyond work" (interview July 2011).

By 2011 *Art & Entreprise* had gained some legitimacy and Virginie was designing a new dance project. In June and July she presented two artists to the bank's employees: a dance teacher specialising in contact-improvisation dance, Stéphanie Auberville, and her partner, a visual artist. The participative project is based on gestures: the artists aim to collect employees' gestures to make a dance composition and a flipbook. The latter is a way to give employees a tangible object, a souvenir of their participation, but the most important for the artists seems to be the final performance based on the collected gestures. In the remainder of the paper I will confront two artistic events: a first failed attempt to make bankers dance and a second more successful attempt to challenge their embodiment during a buffet.

THE FAILED DANCE PERFORMANCE

38 employees out of 220 participated in the dance project during the autumn and the three artists are presenting its outcome in February 2012. The participation is higher than in the last art project and both bankers, traders and support professions are represented. The artists are rather confident about the event. Just in case they have invited a group of friends to perform the dance with them. The cafeteria situated in the basement near the canteen will be the place for the dance performance Virginie has announced via email to all employees. Lunchtime seems adapted for social events and the appointment is at noon. As employees usually eat around 12:30 it is easy for them to come on their way to the self-service restaurant. The cafeteria looks like a small bar with white walls and pillars, blue carpets and neon lights. Ink drawings of various gestures are pinned on the walls and the flipbooks showing a drawing evolving from a man working at a computer to a man in a relaxed position are ready on a table. Very few employees actually turn up, less than 10 and only two female bankers. This creates a sensation of embarrassment and the artists have to wait what seems a long moment before starting. After a short speech Virginie passes the microphone to Stéphanie who explains the process of the project and compliments bankers for the beautiful gestures they gave. She then puts on some easy music and asks all present people to follow her in the dance. She performs some gestures – the most significant for her – and asks them to imitate her. It does not look like a dance, rather like a strange gym session, hands up, steps and some swirling. Only one employee – the financial director's assistant who is a middle-aged woman who loves to dance and has worked in the bank for ages – participates. The rest of them stand by the bar or behind a pillar and watch the artists move in all directions to fill the space. A woman who passes by cries in disdain, stigmatizing the artists and the works council: "Oh my god, what are they doing? I surely do not want to participate". As they are polite the attending employees stay until the end, but they quickly leave as soon as the music is turned off.

A couple of hours after the event, I receive a desperate email from Virginie: she complains about her colleagues' harsh reactions and tells me she feels like crying. "They don't understand what the artists wanted to do, they don't see the point of the action, they don't like the flipbook. They wonder how I could do all this for such a meagre result". What they are assessing is the tangible result and not the process: the possibility given to employees to interact with an experimental dancer, which some employees nevertheless valued highly in the interviews. The artists also express a great disappointment and consider the event to be a failure. The main sensation I had in the cafeteria was a great feeling of embarrassment and misunderstanding between the two parts. Identifying with employees who were bluntly asked to dance in an uninviting context I did not even think of dancing, as if their discomfiture was transmitted to my limbs. The lights were crude, the music was commonplace and they had never seen the artists' friends before. Besides their image was at stake and as the person in charge of communication, standing at the left end of the bar in the picture 1, later told me "the body is complicated here. It's not the place for it. Addressing it in a frontal way doesn't work. It hurts your credibility" (interview March 2012).



Picture 1 : February 2012. First attempt to make bankers dance
(researcher's photo)

OCCUPYING THE BANK'S LOUNGES

After this failure the group of artists (Virginie, Stéphanie and their friends) decide to take revenge on La Banque d'Affaires, which happens one year later. As Virginie does not have any budget left, the collective invests its own means (time, additional staff and artistic competencies) in the organisation of a happening in the elegant lounges situated at the first floor. Commenting on the 2012 flop they said they had to be much smarter and talked about organising a fake conference; in fact the event mixes sound, deviant bodies and a reorganisation of space. As bankers tend to live inside their expertise, which often leads to closed, neat or absent bodies, the artists basically want to deconstruct their image. In fact Stéphanie says she is looking for a friction ("*frottement*"), meaning both an embodied confrontation and an intellectual experiment. Dance having common aspects with fight (for example in capoeira or tango) it can be a way to physically challenge employees. The artists are a group of seven people including Virginie and they act in accordance with the works council. The happening can be described as the action of a subculture and dominated group (the works council assisted by artists) inside a dominant culture (bankers and their solid institution). Virginie's art project has thus evolved from private identity claim ("Look, I am an artist") to public redefinition of a group of employees ("Look, we are not who you think"). As a collectively planned action the happening has a political scope.

In February 2013 the works council had invited all employees to its annual information meeting in the *salon de musique*. The goal is to inform them about past social and cultural actions and discuss future activities like travels, sports or culture initiatives. The lounge is filled with chairs and

more than 50 employees are present, probably only a few bankers. The atmosphere is good and they have all been invited to lunch afterwards. The dancer and her partner are standing as a threat in the doorway and I wonder how many employees recognize them; time has passed and there is a high turnover rate in the bank. The persons I have interviewed in 2011 and 2012 either ignore my presence or do not recognize me. At the end of the works council's speech (with slides) a space of discussion is opened up for employees' suggestions. A silence. A woman talks about going to thalassotherapy. The works council names the difficulties in organising travels when people do not come in the end. Another silence. An unknown woman enquires about the existence of a resting room in the bank. An employee wants to answer but is stopped by Virginie. An unknown man answers her request by referring to his habit of greeting the sun each morning when arriving as a good ritual for wellbeing. His big gestures and unforeseen words identify him as an outsider; people laugh gently and some faces seem a bit shocked in the video. Suddenly Virginie stands up and invites all employees to have lunch; this clearly indicates that what counts in the happening are not words but gestures. She opens the huge wooden doors to the most beautiful lounge (*le salon des quatre saisons*) and quickly informs me that from now on she is going to perform ("I'm on 'perf' now but go on, you already know the people...").

Stéphanie and her team have introduced various perturbations in all four lounges available for circulation. The buffet table offers delicate food and two *maîtres d'hôtel* are serving drinks, but the table also exhibits a place setting with a chair, a plate and a napkin with a notice mentioning "*réserve*". In the lounge where directors usually meet (*salle du conseil*) next door there is a long table supporting a couple of laptops; a huge blue tablecloth expands on the floor like a wedding gown, making it impossible to walk into the room without stepping on it (see picture 2). On the boudoir's desk on the other side of the buffet room a conference telephone is transmitting a voice reciting something in English nearby an old book about magical art written by Roger Callois. When all employees have entered the buffet room the artists put all chairs in front of the main entrance (picture 3). At this point the financial director leaves without eating anything with a smile on her lips, as if her absence was preferable for this little recreation to continue.

The artists occupy the four lounges: they move very slowly between employees and improvise strange dance movements in couples or alone. Stéphanie is barefoot and starts embodied dialogues with employees, even stealing an olive from someone's plate. Without a word she moves around and between them; as she often comes from behind some employees stand close to the wall to avoid her. The artists also sit down at the conference table to talk about passage, which was the conceptual framing of their original dance project in the bank (labelled "*On cherche un passage*"). Their words are transmitted in the lounges through microphones.

All these signs and small perturbations could be interpreted in many ways. A series of physical boundaries have been created to invite employees to transgress them. For obvious reasons of decency they could not take off their shoes like the dancer, but they could step on the tablecloth, sit at the buffet table or climb on a chair to get out. The general sensation is that a stranger is trying to occupy the core of the bank (its most magnificent rooms), questioning the normality of the situation. There is tension because no one actually knows what is going to happen. After a moment we understand that nothing more is going to happen unless we participate, which means altering the apparatus, attacking the artists in

some way. Unlike in February 2012 I feel very tempted to participate, which indicates that the happening is working. I walk on the tablecloth to have a better look at the space; this tiny action very soon identifies me as an external person. The physical tension I sense can be explained considering that the smallest gesture has an impact on the situation. In fact the practice of having lunch in a lounge is physically deconstructed and opened to any kind of move. The assembled chairs in front of the entrance could easily be put away, as could the blue tablecloth. I also notice a pair of old shoes and socks, probably a man's, in a corner. Like in some art exhibitions it is hard to know what is art and what is not, which calls for provocative action.

The artists are now improvising short dances in couples; employees watch them from a distance without showing great reactions, they pretend the situation is normal and continue chatting and eating. If employees agree to consume some art with their food, they do not put their bodies at stake beyond their presence, which in a sense also contributes to increase the tension between bodies. On the video I discovered two exceptions to this non-engagement: a man standing on a chair to take a picture and a woman - the director's assistant again - displaying a brief dance movement. The only element of the happening employees interacted with sincerely was the voice on the phone.

The voice is located in the boudoir, an intimate lounge with angels looking down from the painted ceiling; the bank's director sometimes works here. Virginie told me the compliance officer became "yellow" (read worried) when he discovered it. In the beginning the voice recites a kind of pledge of allegiance of the perfect La Banque d'Affaires employee, referring to the headquarters in New York. Noticing that the phone displays a French mobile number and feeling the overemphasis and irony in his words, employees soon begin to talk with him. They compliment him for his perfect English and then chat with him, probably trying to understand who he really is. They stay for rather long moments in the room, alone and in small groups, laughing and chatting. The man - a former bank employee who is now a playwright - was present in the cafeteria in February 2012 (with his hands on his face on picture 1) and probably felt that a mediated presence would give him more freedom in February 2013. Indeed bank employees are very confident with the phone; it seems much easier for them to interact with a voice than with an entire body. The voice creates a long lasting tension: fear that he is a real banker from New York possibly controlling or mocking the Paris office for the compliance officer, excitement for other employees who try to understand who he really is and perhaps also take the opportunity to mock him. His monotonous voice and absurd declarations clearly make fun of the exaggerated prestige of the bank. The book about magical art on the desk underlies the fascination an old financial institution can exert on employees, outsiders and clients. In fact the expression goes new clients are "converted" to La Banque d'Affaires.



Picture 2: February 2013. Occupying the Salle du conseil (researcher's photo)



Picture 3: February 2013. Virginie and Stéphanie dancing in the Salon de musique (Researcher's photo)

DISCUSSION: THE CRITICAL POWER OF ART PERFORMANCE

The happening described above could be seen as critique physically taking place thanks to awkward gestures, alternative circulation of bodies and provocative voices. Not only is there a reorganisation of space (picture 2 and 3), there is also a collective improvisation of what it means to be a body in such a space. We should be aware though that the happening was carefully planned: the artists spent several days in the lounges to tune all aspects of their action. Having lunch together in a workplace is a habit that is generally not put at risk; it reinforces the dominating culture and is hardly considered as an event. In total institutions as this bank lunch is the only entrance for outsiders as researchers and artists, except for those of us who are ready to make a career in finance (Ortiz, 2014) or create a blog for professionals to talk freely about banks (Luyendijk, 2015), which does not give access to work spaces. An important part of the job in La Banque d’Affaires is to be able to behave in the lounges, to be discreet, physically distant and “have a light step in the corridors” as an analyst describes it. To walk around barefoot while moving extremely slowly like Stéphanie does can here be considered as an event: she is in fact in her studio doing an experiment or even better at home, at a party she has arranged herself. She also nearly touches bodies, suggesting a sensual relation, which is perhaps the most efficient attack to bankers and managers’ physical integrity, largely built on appearance and conformity (Alvesson, 2001; Haynes, 2012). It is also an attack to the beautiful lounges where such a disgusting, sneaky and bare body has no right to be. As such the happening relies on counter-performative techniques: it introduces slowness, doubts and hesitation in a world where bodies are expected to be quick, invisible and self-confident.

Even if the happening was a “sad encounter” in the Spinozian sense (Thanem & Wallenberg, 2015) between bodies who act on different plans and could in fact never meet, either in words or dance, showing the huge distance an organisation can create between bodies, support staff’s alliance with dancers has created collective agency and joy. In 2009 the works council handed in an alarming report on professional stress to the management team; a good part of support staff but also bankers were under great stress and were already compensating with addictive behaviours (drinking, smoking, taking pills). The sociologist in charge of the stress inquiry told me the bank’s management team had totally ignored his report. In contrast to that, the happening shows how the works council has slowly become a group capable of provocation and artistic imagination. During the buffet I could read joy on many faces, indicating the happening had introduced new fantasies into reality, which also means new possibilities of action.

Furthermore Virginie and her allies have accomplished a kind of deed, which is one of the original meanings of performance. The happening is a parody of the cocktails or lunches I have observed in the lounges and employees probably think: who are these mad people dancing around us, what do they want from us? The physical tension thus created is enough to speak about a success. Something indeed happened that stoned bodies even more and perhaps made them conscious of their inability to move. In a sense the happening produced even more closure and the only value of the event is that it could be done, a bit like a bet or an experience. “Critique in the midst of the performative turn is thus best understood as experimental critique” (Muniesa, 2014: 128). Virginie has invited her filthy friends to dance in the sublime lounges of La Banque

d’Affaires, which can perhaps be considered “an outrageous break with all that seem reasonable and acceptable” and thus a Real act (Contu, 2008). Critical artists consequently seem to be perfect allies for critical researchers who are looking for new strategies of intervention in organisational contexts. Critical artists should not be mistaken for activists but their practice of art, here dance, aims at producing social change, here more sincere embodied relations. For strict research purposes this happening could be compared to more brutal acts of occupation or even robbery of a bank’s artistic assets. In fact what if the occupy Wall Street group and its related artists had managed to get into the bank’s lounge? What would happen with banks if bankers’ sublime bodies were really attacked by civil society? Art performance, through its blurring of fiction and reality, opens up for alternative political action at the level of everyday life. To create such frictions through artistic action could have a deeper effect on individuals than we think.

The practice of art performance in organisational contexts disturbs patterns of what is considered to be sensible; here bodies appear in their bareness and fragility, in their sensuality and ambiguity, in their closure and openness. Critical artists’ aesthetic tactics highly depend on the context of intervention: before acting they have to understand how things work in the organisation, how different spaces can be used, what internal resources there are, how employees could be addressed. Artistic processes take time and are filled with uncertainties; the artists have to act as a collective led by a core of persons with very strong motivations. In fact both Virginie and Stéphanie are extremely stubborn and follow their idea of occupation of the lounges as a personal desire. The plan is to have fun at work and shake the bankers; the researcher has to accept the plot and act lightly as an artist. In fact my second round of interviews was inspired by the artistic embodied methods: I tried to lengthen the silences and put participants in uneven situations, putting both my own and their body at stake in the encounter. The idea of experimenting alternative gestures in the bank’s spaces was an obsession for the artists and the happening, happy ending of their difficult project, convinced me of the political strength of dance and sensuality. It contributed to open up the boundaries of the organisation and thus create friction between the bankers’ world and the artists’ world, asking CMS new questions about the nature of embodied political action.

CONCLUSION

What is to learn from this art performance is twofold, a coin connecting artistic practice to embodied research. First the researcher should pay closer attention to what is happening in the art world and take contemporary artists and their courage seriously. Following persons who generally do not work nor belong to any formal organisation but who are very conscious of the close link between politics and aesthetics opens up new possibilities for research and a sensible understanding of organisational life. At the expense of loosing credibility in academia critical researchers could make an alliance with critical artists and make use of their rich knowledge, not in the name of creativity or effectiveness but with the goal to question and deconstruct aesthetic arrangements. Furthermore artists can both give new impulses to our research agendas and disseminate them to wider publics.

Second the artistic tactics of slowness, lack of shame, physical exposure and insistence are worth adopting for organisational beings and researchers. Instead of always escaping when it becomes impossible for us to conform to a place or situation we should expose our fundamental incapacity to adapt and occupy our organisations with more personal beliefs. We should behave like fools when needed, and by that I do not mean playing fools but changing our way to perceive reality, which means living closer to our dreams and fantasies. This could occur thanks to a greater presence at work, which implies experimenting with tiny actions or rare gestures. If we become numb and unable to dance like bank employees it will be too late to understand the debilitating impact the organisation has on our bodies.

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