1-1-2018

Chicks with Sticks: Becoming a Business School Guerrilla Knitter

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**Figure 1. Business School entrance,
with a small colourful piece of knitting on the door handle**

We do not report a tale of research success, but one of struggle. With yarn, space, gender, guerrilla resistance, aesthetics, narrations, and, finally, ethical approvals. The title of this editorial refers to female knitting practice and expresses a bottom up, self-ironic and maladjusted approach towards one's own business school existence. We seek to encourage readers to try out new, arts-based forms of resistance at work, to bring in the aesthetics and the body when all words in the seemingly rational discourse fail.

Once, we found ourselves inhabiting our space in a business school that was cold and sterile. The hallways long, confusing and empty, all doors closed for fire security or other, the walls empty, again for fire security or other reasons. Not only did we perceive the setting as unwelcoming, the business school at that time faced changes and challenges that did not contribute to a "warm" atmosphere either. We ourselves did not feel acutely worried, but each of us was shovelling around in their hearts some uncomfortable feelings that wanted to be expressed.

We took things in our own hands – literally – when the idea emerged to deploy an arts-based method to deal with the experience. In this editorial, we tell our story of a guerrilla knitting project in a business school in UK Higher Education. Urban social practices of knitted objects placed, or tagged, in public spaces (guerrilla knitting, yarn bombing, or graffiti knitting) have been reflected upon in a context of social resistance, in the area of art history, for only about a decade now (Strunk, 2012). Recently this practice has received attention in a management studies context (Ahmas and Koivunen, 2017; Vachhani, 2012) and we want to explore its potential in a business school. Guerrilla knitting has been associated with craftivism, an amalgamation of craft and activism (Vachhani, 2012: 96), and has been used as a form of resistance that had "its roots in feelings of not being engaged into the decision making" and attempts of empowerment (Ahmas and Koivunen, 2017: 69). So, this was exactly what we needed. The aim of using guerrilla knitting was to resist in some new ways, to generate individual reflection and also narratives among organizational members about issues that were emerging for them.

Knitting as an arts-based, guerrilla method

When management scholars came to explore artistic practice with crafts material in organizations (Rippin, 2006, 2013; Gaya Wicks and Rippin, 2010), why should we not intervene with the aesthetics of organisational life. Guerrilla knitting as an arts-based method addresses "not just the cleaned-up, instrumental concerns of 'the business' but the messy, unordered side as well" (Taylor and Hansen, 2005: 1224) and in this editorial, we aim to encourage some ideas. This approach may also be an inspiration to critical scholars who consider playful activism in business schools. Business schools and their members around the globe are exposed to increasing pressures to perform, to achieve excellence and to succeed financially (Parker, 2014; Saren, 2010) and critical management scholars have argued that instead of fighting against performativity, CMS should seek to become more performative. We understand this call for being "performative" in the sense of cultural performance that is not about economic efficiency, but about cultural efficacy, as a "reflexive transgression of social structures […], marginal, on the edge […] capable of temporarily staging and subverting […] normative functions" (McKenzie, 2001: 8).

Guerrilla knitting is a cultural practice not operating from top-down, but from the margin as it is anonymous and unpredictable with regard to its occurrence in space and time. Guerrilla knitting has been considered as an emerging form of quiet activism of everyday making (Hackney, 2013). Reactions commonly linked to guerrilla knitting include individuals' insecurity towards mysterious action, a perception of re-appropriation, the symbolic and aesthetic interpretations of warmth (yarn) versus coldness (common building materials such as concrete or stone) (Strunk, 2012).

This practice is very versatile and has special potential: Guerrilla knitting can be an individual form of expression, feminist statement or "general statement about consumerism, mass production and waste, or a method by which specific (political) messages can be knitted and communicated as a renegade practice" (Vachhani, 2012: 101). Knitting also has become a means to critique capitalism and exploitative labour practices and to forge alternative ways of living (Greer, 2008). Guerrilla knitting has been considered as a method to work on organisational issues, whereby the aesthetic practice sparked creative ideas and "gave rise to empathic openness between individuals" (Ahmas,

2012). It can for example be used in an organization to support the planning and implementation of an exhibition project, facilitated by the manager, making use of the emerging nature of guerrilla knitting (Ahmas and Koivunen, 2017). Guerrilla knitting indeed is emerging and unstructured, depending on how those who are involved handle it. This is a promising context to further explore its potential in an organisational context.

Auto-ethnography

The guerrilla arts-based approach adopted here has a strong auto-ethnographic dimension as in other arts-based approaches (Rippin, 2013) as we as researchers ourselves worked in the organisation. Whilst with auto-ethnography there is the risk of the researchers being too close to the research site (Van Maanen, 2011), the nature of this project required us researchers to be as close as possible to the organisation in order to understand how and why people reacted to the knitting in certain ways and to know as much as possible about the organisation (Schnurr and Teerikangas, 2013). Our findings from interview data shows that indeed, organisational members such as admin staff and academic staff who encountered our guerrilla knitting have developed further thoughts that started with knitting and ended with things related to, for example, hygiene and paranoia. So we do use post-hoc rationalisations as a data resource, but we also use accounts and narrations of people's aesthetic experience that in the interviews were not fully rationalised and that have grown over time during the exchange among organisational members.

Our guerrilla knitting project involved the anonymous application of the material of wool, in knitted form, to architectural devices and pieces of furniture in a business school, mainly on door handles and stair rails. As part of this we held regular conversations with 15 employees in the organisation (firstly without people knowing that it was us who attached the knitting to understand how people reacted and later when people knew about the project to be able to ask some more specific questions). We also kept a diary of what we observed ourselves especially with regard to how people reacted to knitting, interacted with it as well as how long it stayed on.

We followed the knitting closely for three months after it was initially attached. As in other practices of "graffiti" knitting, the artefacts may last long but are not considered as permanent, different from sprayed graffiti, and can more easily be removed. In our case, some of these artefacts were around for weeks, and two pieces of yarn stayed for up to five months in the space, one item on a restroom door was still there ten months later and outlasted one of us researchers (Brigitte) who left the organization.

Gender

The practice also relates to many questions of gender as knitting is a form of handcraft (Vachhani, 2012) and indeed, due to our upbringing and gendered school education that involved knitting, and participation of one of the authors in a "knit and natter" group composed solely of females, we, as two female researchers, did not only feel attracted to the practice but also were able to produce the artefacts. Knitting has been discussed with regard to political and feminist activities (Minahan and Wolfram-Cox, 2011), redefining the devalued and traditionally domestic feminine craft as an empowering and creative action (Kelly, 2013). Newer studies have discussed arts-based research methods including crafts as an opportunity to resist and destabilise the predominantly masculine discourse in academia, whereby they emphasise that these methods are for all genders (Biehl-Missal, 2015). In this spirit, we have chosen a provocative title for the editorial but do not limit the idea of guerrilla arts-based practice to female-only practice.

Ethical approval

On another note, quite ironically, arts-based resistance and data generation needs to be carefully managed nowadays. In accordance with the ethical research framework of our university, we met with the Departmental Research Officer and filled in an ethical approval form that, after another round of revision, was approved. This issue can be interpreted as a structural and bureaucratic mechanism that is in place to prevent the possibility of anything "resistant" or challenging occurring in the workplace. When referring to guerrilla knitting, we have, in our ethical approval form, used the term "interior decoration", hoping for approval and building on the fact that arts-based approaches often are welcomed for their instrumental value.

On the other hand, during our project, this functioned as some form of personal reassurance and legitimation, as we felt less like political guerrilla knitters but in a more bureaucratic way, like researchers on a project. For example, when two artefacts were ripped off door handles we were starting to, in quite an irrational way, feel "threatened" by possible aggressive and, in our view, "intolerant" forms of feedback. In the end, the atmosphere did not turn to the negative or destructive and colleagues volunteered to be interviewed after a period of four weeks when we put up a poster explaining the project and looking for people to talk to us.

Bodies … absent and present in space

Space and touch

The guerrilla method took place right inside the organization. In cultural and performance studies, the notion of site-specificity is used to emphasise that distinctive local features affect people's perception of arts-based methods (Biehl, 2017: 86; Kloetzel and Pavlik, 2009). Guerrilla Knitting is strongly related to the space, operating from the assumption that space is much more than the architecture, but providing a material frame for people's experiences of organisational life and the meaning they give to their existence in these places. Our method of guerrilla knitting affects and subtly alters the office setting that typically is about power and control (Dale and Burrell, 2007) by introducing the material of wool into it. Pieces of knitting were attached to door handles covering the metal (Figure 1-5), situated symbolically at the threshold, or "limen". This positioning reinforced the idea of a liminal encounter (McKenzie, 2001: 9) that is important for cultural performances.

The main feature of guerrilla knitting in addition to the visual is the tactile apprehension. There is considerable literature on touch in medicine and interdisciplinary approaches (Hertenstein and Weiss, 2011), and increasing interest in tactility and mobile electronic devices, and a longer tradition of the exploration of touch in the humanities (Sedgwick, 2003). Research concerned with affect, tactility and sensuous relationships that are enabled by arts-based approaches such as knitting in organisations are under-researched.

The tactile aspect of the pieces is of relevance for the perception because it puts aesthetic perception before vision, as a shift away from the semiotic to the embodied. Several interviewees emphasised that touch played an important role, for example one encountered the artefacts firstly through touch, only then visually perceived them. This may constitute an initial "touching" moment when surprisingly feeling something in one's own hand that otherwise, in the daily routine in organisational spaces, is not there. Obviously, these items through their unusual appearance and central location invite touch, attracting and requiring people to put their hand onto.

Figure 2. Women's restroom door handle

Figure 3. Restroom door handle

Figure 4 and 5. Post room door handle

Bringing the bodies back into the space

With regard to guerrilla knitting, the location of the medium and its context is more powerful than the object itself (Vacchani, 2012: 92). In our initiative, the yarn on the female restroom door handle (Figure 2) was one of the first items that had actively been removed. Several participants emphasised that they started to perceive the yarn as something "unhygienic", it made them realize that their workplace is shared and "that people share their germs and everything". Embodied traces and fragments such as corporeal seeping and secretion (Riach and Warren, 2015) have received limited attention in organisational research, pointing to an obviously "messy" aspect that typically is concealed by surfaces that appear "clean", "sterile", and cold. Interestingly, the knitted objects did not draw attention to the objects they concealed, as typical in guerrilla knitting, but brought people to consider a more abstract concept that relates to the overall environment.

The arts-based guerrilla method can be seen in the context of Sigmund Freud's interpretation of dreams that works with visual and verbal displacements and replacements and phenomena of condensation and comprises ("Kompromissbildung" – Laplanche and Pontalis, 1986: 544) where different ideas are being brought together to reveal underlying thoughts. Knitted artefacts can bring ideas and spaces together, for example the artefact in the restroom that related to touch and hygiene – issues that usually are quite obvious in this space but became an issue to reconsider through the encounter with the yarn. In these ways, our method links to arts-based methods that use analogous artefacts as evocative representations (Barry and Meisiek, 2010: 1505) by putting even more emphasis on the aesthetic experience in organisational life, and bringing the bodies back into the office space that is perceived as sterile and cold.

One participant said that even though the unhygienic is present without the knitting, the yarn might have this made come up more. In this case, the medium is evocative of more abstract things. Knitted materials and the yarn stand for "connections" and "networked" relationships allowing recognition of the fact that on the aesthetic level, others are inescapably connected to us, foregrounding the constantly active and intercorporeal character of embodied organisational lives (Riach and Warren, 2015).

This dimension is often marginalised in organisational life and researchers already have emphasised that all kinds of fluids and uncontrolled bodily substances, which often relate to the female, are repressed in organisation (Höpfl, 2000). Knitting traditionally is considered an indoor activity exercised by women, embedded in a context of gift giving and social connections (Gandolfo and Grace, 2010). Guerrilla knitting brings these practices into the office space, thereby emphasising a political dimension: Public knitting has been used in the German student revolts in 1968, connecting to an earlier practice when during the French revolution females practiced knitting to take part in the assemblies, heckling. Applying the product of what typically is considered "female" work, we intended to offer interpretations that may relate to the marginalisation of the female in office settings (Gatrell, 2011) and to metaphorical contexts that include issues such as caring, emotional work, affects and empathy as a "warm" addition to a competitive, bureaucratic office setting. However it appears that we have primarily brought the body back into organizations, triggering issues of fluids and hygiene, a lurking, invisible threat.

Narratives

The inanimate objects of guerrilla knitting have led to the emergence of new narratives when organisational members started speculating about their origin and meaning, controversially assessing its usefulness or uselessness, its decorative and aesthetic aspects and its symbolic dimensions. We tried to bring this aspect even "closer" to staff members by, in a second stage, attaching yarn bows to individual's door handles (Figure 6).
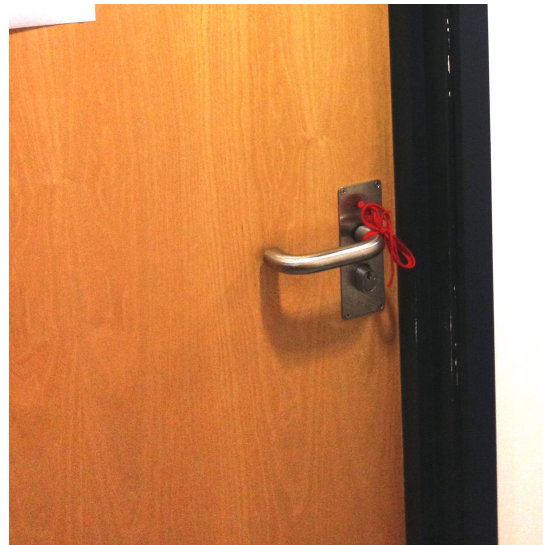
Figure 6. Office door with a "threatening" yarn bow.

Being more directly addressed by yarn on the personal door, one colleague spent "an entire morning wondering" about why she or he had been "singled out", or "whether this has been totally random". Referring to The Godfather movie, mafia symbolism and historical signings (the X on doors when the pest was rampant), the individual pondered the political climate in the business school and personal experiences of being "shut down" and followed this line of thinking systematically, referring to a "classic paranoid semiosis" by constantly trying to interpret the meaning of the placements of the yarn. While we did absolutely not wish to be perceived as bullies or mafia-like, these findings indicate that guerrilla knitting in the office has had the power to trigger an emotionally increased process of semiosis that is based on thoughts on the organisation that already were present. Also, it created organisational members' feedback on the potential and limits of the project in terms of arts-based resistance, suggesting, for example, more collective and organised forms of resistance where people actually meet and talk.

Discussion

We suggest that such arts-based guerrilla approaches be seen as an opportunity for management scholars to contribute in a creative format that does not provide easy answers and solutions, but rather works through the articulation of the irritation. With regard to critical management studies for example, it has been demanded that performative action "be clear about what it wants, or at least debate" potential alternatives (Spicer et al., 2009: 553). Arts-based guerrilla forms however may unfold a critical potential particularly by waiving a linear format and structured debate on organizational issues that can be read as just another affirmation of the existing discourse dominating organizations (Biehl-Missal, 2012: 227). Being in opposition to the "order", resisting clear structures, but not directly opposing, would seem a logical way of guerrilla approaches. What needs to be further explored in any guerrilla endeavour, for example the knitting project, is the collective potential, for example through a knit and natter group (Kelly, 2013) that does more than that, engages in talking, plotting and planning. Other expressions such as "chicks with sticks", "stich and ditch" groups are more political. There may be more radical forms of yarn spreading in office areas or other departments and universities as a form of social contagion to destabilize and potentially re-negotiate "the order" through reference to "the other".

While sociologists have observed the emergence of the academic-activist who is engaged in social opposition (Chatterton, 2008), with realist trends in contemporary art and social activism, this door to using art as a guerrilla form is open not only to those with explicit

artistic talents, but, for example, to those who knit and decide to create colourful displays of knitted yarn as a "guerrilla knitting" project. In this sense, we advocate for the arts-based academic activist who brings back in the aesthetics and the body to understand things differently and in other ways, to oppose the rationalist organizational order and, at best, to influence and change it.

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