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Troubling/Transforming Working Lives: Judith Butler, Gender, Work and Organization

Useless bodies? Exploring the ethical potential of art

Daniela Pianezzi 

Department of Management, University of Verona, Verona, Italy

Correspondence

Daniela Pianezzi.

Email: daniela.pianezzi@univr.it

Abstract

This paper examines the ethical value of artistic artifacts in challenging the unequal valuation of working bodies with a focus on the contemporary art exhibition 'Useless bodies?' by Danish artists Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset. Drawing on Judith Butler's work and posthuman theory, particularly Braidotti's contributions, the paper argues that this exhibition exemplifies how art can foster an ethics of interdependency, one that both critiques dynamics of misrecognition and imagines alternative futures. Furthermore, the paper proposes that this affirmative and critical ethics provides theoretical and methodological foundations for work and organization studies, prompting new questions about the significance of embodiment, esthetics, and artifacts for conducting (ethical) research.

KEYWORDS

artifacts, bodies, Butler, ethics, posthumanism

1 | INTRODUCTION

This study brings together the works of Judith Butler and posthuman theory, particularly Rosi Braidotti's, through the contemporary art exhibition 'Useless bodies?' by the Danish artists Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset, held at Fondazione Prada in Milan, Italy, in 2022. These artists have explored the relationship between bodies, space, and subjectivity throughout their career. The exhibition sheds light on the various meanings our bodies acquire in late capitalism (Elmgreen & Dragset, 2022). The title *Useless bodies?* challenges the notion of what constitutes a 'useful body' in contemporary society, a concern that has recently gained attention in organization studies, where researchers have started to question the relationship between bodies and organizing, with a focus on how some workers' bodies

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are deemed more valuable than others (Ashraf et al., 2020; Bryant & Jaworski, 2011; Gatrell, 2019; Huopainen & Satama, 2019; Jack et al., 2019; Johansson et al., 2017; Lee, 2018; Mavin & Grandy, 2016; Tyler & Cohen, 2010).

In this paper, I propose that the encounter with the bodies-artifacts of the exhibition stimulates ethical questioning and lays the foundation for an 'ethics of interdependency' built on the interplay between Butler's and Braidotti's views on materiality, bodies, and subjectivity. This encounter raises important questions, such as how to cultivate an ethics of interdependency in the workplace, how to value work that sustains interdependency, and how this ethics of interdependency redefines our obligations to one another.

The paper has three related aims. First, it aims to bring Butler's and Braidotti's work into dialog to develop a critical and affirmative ethics of interdependency that unmasks non/misrecognition and imagines alternative and inclusive forms of embodied coexistence. Second, it explains how we can learn about an ethics of interdependency through experiencing art and artifacts. Drawing on the long-standing tradition in organization studies that acknowledge the significance of esthetics and artifacts for work and organization studies (Alferoff & Knights, 2003; Cohen et al., 2006; Gagliardi, 1999; Linstead, 2018; Pouthier & Sondak, 2021; Strati, 2010; Taylor & Hansen, 2005; Tyler & Cohen, 2010; Warren, 2008), the paper proposes that artistic artifacts help us to challenge hegemonic understandings of the body (Pouthier & Sondak, 2021) and offer an alternative 'text' to read the norms that regulate its appearance in the working space (Cohen et al., 2006). These artifacts invite us to question the ways in which recognition is typically organized along the lines of gender, race, and class and imagine how it can be done differently (Butler, 2022).

The third aim of the paper is to propose a methodological approach based on an ethics of interdependency. This approach recognizes the role of materiality, affect, memory, and imagination (Fotaki et al., 2014; Gilmore et al., 2019; Irigaray, 2002; Pullen & Rhodes, 2014; Sinclair, 2019) and explores the esthetic, poetic, ethical, and political moments that characterize our encounter with (posthuman) others in the research field (Linstead, 2018). The paper challenges a positivist faith in detachment, neutrality, and objectivity and adopts a *feminist écriture* (Fotaki et al., 2014) that is embodied, emotional, and evocative. Cultivating a research practice based on an ethics of interdependency means recognizing that researchers and those being researched are mutually dependent (Butler, 2004a) and cultivating reciprocal recognition through encounters with the (post)human other.

The upcoming sections are structured as follows. Section 2 combines the theories of Butler and Braidotti to develop an ethics of interdependency. This lays the foundation for a conversation on the liberating ethical potential of art in Section 3. Following this, the subsequent sections provide an overview of the methodology employed (Section 4) and an account of my personal encounter with the art exhibition (Section 5). I describe how the meeting with bodies-artifacts brings into focus an ethics of interdependency. Finally, Sections 6 and 7 highlight the implications of this ethics of interdependency for the study of work and organizations.

2 | BODIES, MATERIALITY AND AN ETHICS OF INTERDEPENDENCY

Butler and Braidotti both argue that materiality and the body are essential to an ethics of interdependency that can overcome the limitations of modern ethics (Braidotti, 2020; Butler, 2020, 2022). Modern ethics, which dates back to the mid-eighteenth century and was developed by philosophers, such as Rousseau, Kant, and Locke, presupposes an autonomous and abstract adult who is inherently free from the condition of dependence that is constitutive of human life and growth. However, Butler problematizes this view, arguing that the ideals of individualism and independence that underpin modern ethics are ultimately harmful (Butler, 2020, 2022). Such a vision of the human places a narrow definition of individual and organizational accountability at the forefront, seeing equality solely as an *individual* right. Instead of this moral universalism based on disembodied, autonomous, and independent reason, Butler proposes a corporeal ethics grounded in our shared vulnerability (Butler, 2022).

Drawing from Merleau-Ponty's work, Butler argues that the body serves as the foundation of an ethics of interdependency, revealing our mutual dependence and shared vulnerability (Butler, 2022). This interdependency then forms the basis for our responsibility toward others as we are always implicated in each other's lives. Rather than seeking to overcome this interdependency, Butler suggests that we should cultivate relationships of mutual care and recognition that preserve it (Butler, 2020, 2022).

Furthermore, Butler critiques the narrow definition of the “human” within modern ethics, which privileges certain bodies—typically male, white, heterosexual bodies of the upper class—while relegating others to a sub-human status. This limited perspective fails to account for the full range of experiences and identities, and Butler calls for a critique of the organizational processes that perpetuate these inequalities making some bodies matter more than others. By foregrounding the materiality of the body and the interdependency of lives, Butler's ethical-political project challenges hegemonic understandings of the human and offers a more inclusive vision of ethical responsibility.

In line with Butler's ideas, Braidotti further expands on the notion of sub-human bodies, which include “the sexualized others (women, LGBTQ+), the racialized others (non-Europeans, indigenous), and the naturalized others (animals, plants, the Earth)” (Braidotti, 2020, p. 3). Braidotti's posthumanism emphasizes that our bodies are always already connected to technology, animal life (*zoe*), and the environment (*geo*) and never exist in isolation as *individual* bodies. Therefore, Braidotti advocates for a radical and universal equality between all forms of life, including the human, sub-human, and non-human. This perspective is in line with Butler's (2022) latest work that explains how “be a body at all is be bound up with other living creatures, with surfaces, and the elements, including the air that belongs to no one and everyone, that all remind us of the life that can only persist beyond—and against—property relations” (p. 47). An ethics of interdependency must also extend to preserving and protecting the Earth by imagining ways of living that do “not have humans at its center” (Butler, 2022, 49).

Furthermore, both Butler (2020, 2022) and Braidotti (2013, 2022) urge us to expose the prevailing dynamics of violence and misrecognition, while also envisioning alternative approaches for organizing our present and future embodiment. In this sense, an ethics of interdependency is an affirmative stance that surpasses mere criticism of the existing order and strives to foster creative and forward-looking solutions for safeguarding and nurturing interdependency.

In recent years, scholars drawing from posthumanism have sought to expand Butler's theory of the body to include materiality, which had been previously underexplored in their earlier work (Harding et al., 2017; Harding et al., 2022; Hultin e Introna, 2019). Researchers such as Harding et al. (2017, 2022) have extended Butler's work through Barad's theory of performativity, providing insights into the materialization of working bodies by revealing the performativity of “entangled material agencies” (p. 1213). By combining Butler's and Barad's theories, these scholars propose that bodies are better understood as “material/discursive agentive flesh,” a neologism that emphasizes the role of the physical matter of bodies, such as skin, blood, bones, hair, fat, and organs, in the materialization of working bodies (Harding et al., 2022, 651). Additionally, Hultin and Introna's (2019) study on the Swedish Migration Council, which draws from posthumanism, explores how the materiality of space, such as the office environment, plays a role in the constitution of the migrant subject.

This study shares these scholars' views of subjectivity as emerging from the entanglement of (post)human bodies and broader materiality, thus equally emphasizing the materiality that has largely been ignored in organization studies. It also further develops this perspective by examining the ethical implications and possibilities that arise from this novel understanding of the subjectivation process. By integrating Butler's latest work (2020, 2022) and Braidotti's posthuman theory, the study proposes an ethics of interdependency that elucidates how working bodies come (not) to *matter*. Methodologically, this approach prompts an investigation into the role of art and artifacts as mediums for manifesting the meaning and importance of interdependency. Therefore, the following section delineates the interrelation between this ethics of interdependency and artifacts, followed by an explanation of the research method and a discussion of my experience with the exhibition's artifacts.

3 | THE ETHICAL POTENTIAL OF ART (IFACTS)

As mentioned earlier, an ethics of interdependency acknowledges the ethical significance of materiality, which contrasts with the modern paradigm that considered abstract reasoning as the sole and reliable source of ethics. This shift in paradigm highlights the importance of esthetic-intuitive knowledge and artifacts in constructing an ethical

understanding of life and the world. Esthetic knowledge, derived from the Greek term *aisthànomai*, which means “perceive, feel with the senses,” is grounded in sensory experience. Artifacts, like objects produced with artistic intent, are quintessential to this esthetic knowledge as they are perceived by the senses (Gagliardi, 1999). Artifacts materialize concepts and offer new possibilities for interpreting reality by linking meanings and sensations (Gagliardi, 1999). Therefore, artifacts allow for novel ways of understanding and making sense of reality.

The use of artifacts as a means of exploring work and organizations offers a rich approach to understanding the complexities of organizational life (Alferoff & Knights, 2003; Cohen et al., 2006; Gagliardi, 1999; Linstead, 2018; Pouthier & Sondak, 2021; Strati, 2010; Taylor & Hansen, 2005; Tyler & Cohen, 2010; Warren, 2008). Through exploring the esthetics and materiality of artifacts, researchers have gained insight into the power dynamics, embodied experiences, and cultural meanings that shape work and organizations (Berg & Kreiner, 1990; Gagliardi, 2007; Guillet de Monthoux, 2004; Strati, 2010).

These scholars have advocated for an embodied methodology that seeks to capture the sensory dimensions of organizational life, including the textures, sounds, smells, and tastes that shape organizational practices and experiences (Gagliardi, 2007; Strati, 2010). For instance, Martin's study on residential facilities for the elderly highlights the significance of esthetic experience in comprehending the organization. According to Martin (2002), the researcher's senses and emotions, as well as those of residents and organizational actors, are integral to the practices and relationships within the organization. Thus, the author advocates for an embodied methodology that recognizes the importance of being sensually immersed in the research site, emphasizing the need to engage with the sensory aspects of the organization to fully understand it. This approach provides a more holistic understanding of organizational life that goes beyond the purely cognitive and rational aspects.

Similarly, other studies have aimed to elevate the materiality of organizational life and esthetic knowledge from the margins to the center. These studies have proposed that organizations are better understood as “cultures” with artifacts serving as visible expressions of said cultures (Gagliardi, 1990). By acknowledging that “things,” including bodies, hold significance, an esthetic approach brings the materiality of work and organizational life to the forefront (Kornberger & Clegg, 2004). Artifacts inhabit organizational life, imbuing it with meaning that may or may not be communicated through language by those who produce and experience them (Gherardi, 2009). The organizational space itself emerges as a collection of artifacts that surface in organizational practices and make them possible (Cnossen & Bencherki, 2019).

Within this tradition, some scholars have also explored the ethical and political significance of artifacts (Cohen et al., 2006; Hancock, 2005; Hancock & Tyler, 2007). Martin (2002) notes that power dynamics are implicated in the organization of esthetics. Other scholars have cautioned against a romantic view of esthetics, instead focusing on how organizations consciously and instrumentally capitalize on esthetics to materialize hegemonic visions of organizational reality (Hancock, 2005; Hancock & Tyler, 2007). They argue that artifacts can be designed and developed to convey specific strategic visions and regimes of meaning, which may perpetuate dynamics of identification and exclusion within organizational life (Cohen et al., 2006). In particular, workers themselves can be transformed into artifacts that express organizational culture through esthetic practices, which further entrench power dynamics within the workplace (Hancock & Tyler, 2007).

This literature also raises critical questions about the intertwined relationship between workers' bodies, esthetics, and artifacts. For example, Pouthier and Sondak (2021) show how artworks can reveal anxieties about complying with bodily norms and also offer pathways to freedom. In their study, participants joyfully disrupted oppressive bodily norms in interaction with an artifact, highlighting the subversive character of art and its ability to reveal the multiple ways in which identities are regulated and ordered, producing both abjection and subjectivation (Cohen et al., 2006).

Extending this debate, this article explores how artifacts materialize differential distributions of value at and through work. By soliciting our senses and our bodies, artifacts ground us in the materiality of our situated being, which is inherently relational. This experience, in turn, can help us cultivate an ethics of interdependency. In the following section, I describe my own encounter with artifacts and how it served as the basis for conceptualizing an ethics of interdependency, drawing on the ideas of Butler and Braidotti.

4 | EXPERIENCING ARTISTIC ARTIFACTS

The art exhibition 'Useless Bodies?' was held at Fondazione Prada in Milan from March 31 to August 22, 2022, occupying over 3000 square meters across four gallery spaces and a courtyard. The exhibition featured installations by Danish artists Elmgreen and Dragset.

During my encounter with the artifacts, I found myself rediscovering creativity through experimentation. This encounter can be seen as a form of 'play' with the installation space serving as a playground (Deleuze & Guattari, 1984). 'Play' here refers to the fact that reality does not come to us "neatly packaged" (Linstead, 2018, p. 340) but is rather messy and unordered (Deleuze & Guattari, 1984). Playful inquiry, as such, remains open to the fluidity and creative alternatives of reality, acknowledging that our apprehension may remain nonlinear and unresolved (Linstead, 2018). Such playful inquiry is driven by mystery, which is a sense of not-knowing that encourages us to suspend our taken-for-granted assumptions and connect with others (Linstead, 2018). Mysterious things puzzle us because they escape the logic of problem-solving (Marcel, 1949). Thus, my encounter with the mysterious artifacts eluded the logico-scientific reasoning that makes knowledge neutral and objective, certain and definitive (Fotaki et al., 2014). However, the esthetic experience would be mistakenly confined to the unspeakable, thus reinforcing a dichotomy between the esthetic and the cognitive. The sensorial experience and its ethical-political meanings all collapse in the scene of the encounter (Hancock, 2005). Drawing from Linstead (2018), I could analytically articulate four moments of my experience.

During my encounter with the artistic artifacts, I experienced an "esthetic moment" (Linstead, 2018, p. 325) that was characterized by immediate and physical sensations. As I wandered through the exhibition space, my senses were fully engaged, allowing me to touch, smell, and hear the artworks. This sensorial experience surpassed the experiential limitations of other two-dimensional media like photography (Cohen et al., 2006; Cohen and Taylor, 2004).

As I encountered the artistic artifacts, a feeling of wonder and surprise enveloped me, and I found myself in a "poetic moment" (Linstead, 2018, p. 325), where the distance between my immediate sensations and the cognitive elaboration of their meanings widened. Some of the artifacts 'glowed' for me (MacLure, 2013), prompting me to pause and contemplate them. I began to question what they were doing *to* me and *with* me (Benozzo & Priola, 2022) and what they could reveal about my own understanding of work life; yet their meanings eluded me at first.

Gradually, I found myself drawn into an ethical moment (Linstead, 2018), where the artifacts transformed into Others (Butler, 2000), provoked my empathy and sense of responsibility. My previous engagement with literature on bodies and organizing, as well as Butler's and Braidotti's works, came to mind, prompting me to wonder how their ideas could help me make sense of the ethical significance of this encounter.

I found that these artifacts embodied ideas about bodies and materiality, inviting me to critically deconstruct regimes of significant that marginalize certain bodies. Within an ethical perspective of interdependency, encounters with others can produce "critical momentum" (Linstead, 2018, p. 327) that disrupts taken-for-granted understandings of reality. This encounter enabled me to understand the ethical significance of vulnerability and interdependency. Gradually, I also became aware of the role of power in defining this ethical relationship, which represents the political dimension of this experience (Linstead, 2018).

The artifacts prompted me to delve deeper into the ways in which certain bodies are privileged over others, and how my research practice could challenge or enable this unequal distribution of value within organizational life. As such, the artifacts engendered an ethical moment that was not solely critical but also affirmative in its ability to open up "the possibility of agency through its relational esthetics" (Linstead, 2018, p. 340). These reflections continued to resonate with me in the following months, evoking memories of my visit to the art exhibition through various media such as photography, written texts, and podcasts produced by Fondazione Prada as part of the project (Harding et al., 2022; Warren, 2008).

In translating these moments into text, I take seriously Fotaki's (2014) invitation to cultivate a *feminist écriture* for organization studies. A *feminist écriture* points to the limits of a disembodied methodological approach that positions the researcher as an outsider, an independent reader of reality. Feminist writing, on the other hand, cultivates a type of

reflexivity that is “corporeal, esthetic, and political” (Fotaki et al., 2014, p. 1252). Sinclair (2019), for instance, explains how embodiment is an important part of becoming a feminist and how ‘writing differently’ (Gilmore et al., 2019) is a political practice for feminist researchers (Irigaray, 2002). Reflexivity, therefore, arises not as independent from, but in relation to, artistic artifacts.

In the following pages, I will share my experience of the art exhibition, partially relying on “sensory recollections” (Warren, 2008, p. 575) of my presence there. As such, my account is not meant to be a faithful, objective representation of the artworks themselves but rather an evocative and allusive reflection on how I personally related to them (Linstead, 2018). It is important to acknowledge that my experience was situated and mediated by my white, feminine, middle-class embodiment. Thus, this encounter with the artifacts is open to novel interpretations as it is conveyed through the medium of writing and photography to the readers of this article.

The following sections describe my experience at the exhibition through the selection of four artworks that relate to the world of work and organizations. I believe that these artworks can help us to critically reflect on how some working bodies are valued more than others and develop an ethics of interdependency that enables us to imagine alternative ways of recognizing and organizing these bodies.

5 | USELESS BODIES?

5.1 | The Garden of Eden: On posthuman bodies

The installation *Garden of Eden* interrogates our experience of work and office space in several ways. It consists of endless rows of identical writing desks (Figure 1), some of which display signs of human activity, such as used coffee cups, vacation photos, and work notes that suggest planned tasks. The installation evokes a human presence that no longer exists (Figure 2). These ‘traces’ of humanity emerged as I walked down the aisle, recalling a not-too-distant past of lived experience in that space—a life that breaks the monotony of repetition and sameness.

This installation recalls recurrent esthetic elements of the photographic representation of the office, such as the theme of the controlled/uncontrolled working space (Cohen et al., 2006; Cohen & Tyler, 2004). The title, *Garden of Eden*



FIGURE 1 Garden of Eden.¹



FIGURE 2 Garden of Eden.

Eden, is a biblical allusion to a space that is only potentially perfect. It is an ordered, good, and abundant place, yet incomplete and vulnerable to the sin of *hubris*—among its inhabitants, there are a serpent and a forbidden tree. Similarly, the space of the installation enmeshes uniformity and conformity with the creativity and originality of deviance (Cohen & Tyler, 2004). However, the order of the place and the rationality of its elements remain pervasive in the gray colors that fill the space.

The working stations of the installation brought to my memory Tunbjork's photos of the office space, analyzed by Cohen and Tyler (2004) and Cohen et al. (2006). Tunbjork's images interrogate disorder and abjection in/of the working space, with the human subject, its body/flesh (Harding et al., 2022) at the center of his focus. Along the same lines, the analysis by Tyler and Cohen (2010) revealed how space enables or rather constrains recognition, opening multiple possibilities of materialization. Their study showed that women perceived the working space in different ways and used it to project a viable image of themselves. Drawing from Butler (2011, 2004a, 2004b), this and other studies have shown how "gender is materialized in and through organizational space" (Tyler & Cohen, 2010, p. 178).

Given the intertwined relationship between organizational space and subjectivity, what is surprising about this art installation is the absence of the human body. This absence invites reflection on the relationship between subjectivity, bodies, and organizational space, which interrogates Butler's work in novel ways.

Importantly, in the (post) pandemic era, this scene evokes a sense of familiarity rather than novelty. It brings to mind the images of empty working spaces that have been repeatedly broadcasted in the media over the past years. My experience of the installation was thus ambiguous with excitement mixed with fear and nostalgia. The fear and

nostalgia were triggered by a perceived possibility of nonexistence and extinction of the human, which is a key theme in posthuman theory (Barad, 2007; Dale, 2005; Harding et al., 2017, 2022). The installation evokes the possibility of the extinction of the human or its relocation to the margins of the working life scene. Computers dominate as the new subjects of the working space.

Braidotti (2013) explains how the posthuman subject emerges in a nature-culture continuum, as a socio-material assemblage that challenges the centrality of the human as the main subject of work. The post-human body is indefinite, indeterminate, and constantly in flux as the social and material elements are interwoven. In the installation scene, the posthuman materiality is represented through the interaction of computer screens, desks, information systems, viruses, and human fingers tapping keyboards from elsewhere or nowhere. Like its biblical counterpart, this *Garden of Eden* points to the potential demise of the human. However, this absence also creates infinite possibilities for reimagining organizational space and the norms that govern workers' bodies, turning fear into excitement. Notably, the absence of the human in the scene is specific as indicated by the tie left on the chair (Figure 2).

The tie left on the chair reminded me of the dominant masculinity that has long been associated with the workplace (Acker, 1990). As such, the absence of this particular 'human' also suggests the potential for freeing our bodies from the binary norms of appearance and recognition that have historically governed our physical presence in organizational spaces. Thus, this installation invites a critical reflection on the ways in which our bodies are policed and regulated by societal norms, especially in the context of the workplace. Furthermore, it suggests the possibility of reshaping these norms through recent technological advancements. As we move toward a more posthuman future, where the line between human and machine becomes increasingly blurred, we have the potential to challenge and subvert traditional gender roles and norms of appearance and recognition in the workplace.

5.2 | The Touch: On ideal bodies

The second installation is titled *The Touch* (Figure 3) and explores the interconnected relationship between touch, space, and the subject. Like the previous installation, the gym lockers are characterized by their uniformity and repetition but are interrupted by traces of lived experience, such as a pile of jeans. The bed, sinks, lockers, mirrors, fitness equipment, and even the 'spare' time all seem to work together to construct the posthuman subject of the installation and shape the esthetic experience of the space. The blurred distinction between the materiality of the place and the human body is central to understanding how the subject emerges as a socio-material assemblage.

Significantly, within the specific context of this installation, 'touch' appears to be that of a potential masseur or masseuse on the body of a white man lying in the bed of a changing room, waiting to receive a massage in the context of a sporting practice. The body of the masseur/masseuse is absent from the scene, highlighting the theme of the visibility/invisibility of work that frequently emerges in the exhibition. This theme challenges the neoliberal (and humanist) distinction between work and life (Sørensen, 2017) and highlights how certain types of work become more valued than others. 'Life' is the space and time of the fitness and health economy, and 'touch' is also suggestive of the emotional and relational skills that the fitness industry expects from its workers who must offer (a surrogate of) care. In this space, "the concentration on individuality is paramount" (Sassatelli, 2022, p. 228). In contrast to the bodies in alliance invoked by Butler (2015), the appearance of fitness centers is highly individualistic, raising questions about the contemporary configuration of interdependency in terms of collective living and consumption spaces.

Several studies have drawn from Butler's work (Johansson et al., 2017; Sinclair, 2005; Van Amsterdam and van Eck, 2018) to explain how bodily ideals regulate workers' bodies beyond the organizational space in the interest of capitalism. For instance, Johansson et al.'s (2017) study explains how the ideal of the athletic body has become central to the definition of managerial identity with a manager's ability to discipline their body seen as a measure of achieving organizational objectives. The athletic body is therefore discursively constructed as a symbol of self-sacrifice and determination, while 'fat' bodies are stigmatized and devalued in the workplace (Amsterdam and van Eck, 2018).



FIGURE 3 The touch.

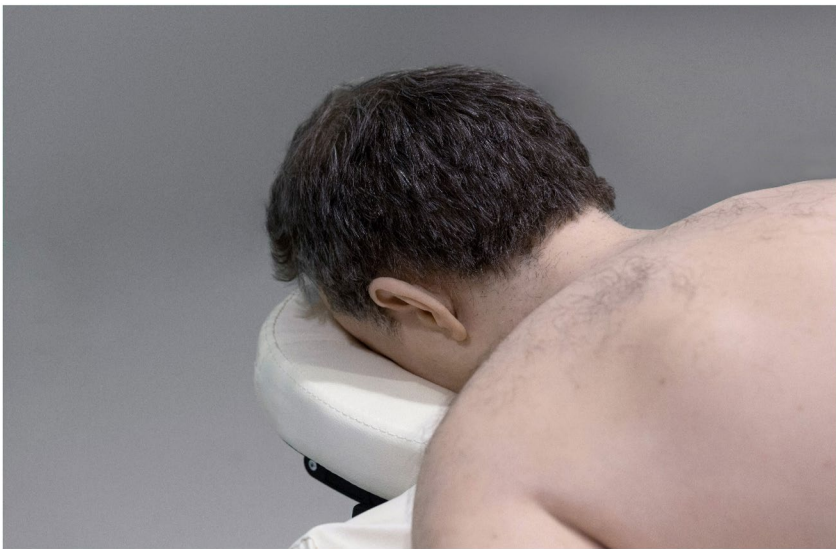


FIGURE 4 The touch.

In line with Foucault's notion of biopolitics, the installation serves as a reminder of how the regulation of workers' bodies extends beyond the boundaries of the office space to individuals' lives (Foucault, 1979). The artwork impresses with its realism in reproducing the carnality of the body, the body/flesh (Harding et al., 2022). My eyes are drawn to the hair on the man's shoulders and the face compressed against the pillow (Figure 4). This carnality of the artifact raises questions about the role that the flesh—the skin, hair, and eyes (both mine and of the man)—plays in the constitution of the subject as a subject that matters and in defining what we owe to each other. In this regard,

Braidotti (2013) argues that the posthuman body is a technologically mediated biological matter regulated by the emerging biogenetic political economy.

Within this regime of intelligibility, the body matters not only in managing its “health and lifestyle” but also in taking care of its “genetic capital”, as argued by Braidotti (2013, p. 121). The athletic bodily ideal analyzed by Johansson et al. (2017) can be further problematized by considering the ‘value’ that the ‘flesh’ acquires under genetic bio-capitalism (Cooper, 2008). In addition to the Foucauldian idea of biopolitics, Braidotti suggests that the spaces of the fitness and health industries are increasingly bio-genetic with the flesh being dematerialized in its conversion into genetic codes. This transformed materiality allows control through prediction and the calculation of health risks and economic surplus. Bodily ideals are not only about the regimes of intelligibility regulating the materialization of the body but also increasingly concern what a body can do now and what capacities it might be able to unfold in the future (Wilmer and Žukauskaitė, 2015).

At the same time, the body and its sensorial experience can also be a source for a new ethical understanding of ourselves, our relationship with others, and the world (Harding et al., 2022). In this regard, Butler’s (2022) latest work explains that the fact that there is always a *being touched* in the act of *touching* reveals that our bodies are “inter-laced” with each other (p. 41). *The Touch* reminds us of our vulnerability and interdependency (Butler, 2011, 2015). Butler (2022) also hints at the “worlded character of touch” (p. 19), suggesting that this interdependency extends beyond our individual bodies. This reflection has been central also in Braidotti’s work, which explains how “the mutual capacity to affect and be affected by others is constitutive of a new-materialist relational vision of subjectivity” (Braidotti, 2022, p. 104). Both Butler and Braidotti thus suggest that our material interdependency can be a resource to counteract the individualizing tendencies of bio-genetic capitalism, which transforms our body and flesh into abstract data to be manipulated and capitalized. This interdependency lays the foundation of an ethics that values and protects our shared vulnerability from emerging forms of capitalist control and commodification.

5.3 | The Pregnant white maid: On abject bodies

The third installation is titled *Pregnant White Maid*, and it features the only female body in the exhibition. However, despite the title, the maid’s body is not the sole focus of the installation. Instead, she exists in relation to another subject: a boy. In the installation, the maid can be seen looking at a child, who is likely not her own, as he escapes her gaze. The maid assumes a posture of service and humility as expected of her work role (Figure 5).

The concept of recognition, as articulated by Butler, is central to this installation. Butler explains that body norms are powerful because they exploit our need for recognition from others. As a result, workers are constantly engaged in identity work, constructing a ‘performing self’ (Goffman, 1959) that conforms to hegemonic norms. Butler’s main thesis is that recognition is always relational, meaning that the maid’s body is contextualized in relation to the boy in front of her and to broader society’s gaze that reinforces recognition norms through repetition.

Another crucial element of this installation is the maid’s pregnancy, but it is unclear who the father of her baby might be, leading visitors to suspect that the master of the house, who is also her employer, may be the father and therefore the master of her body. The maid’s body evokes an archetype that has been explored extensively in the history of art: the maid archetype. Confirming a reciprocal relation between work and “embodied social identity” (Ashcraft, 2013, p. 10), maid work has been historically and socially considered ‘dirty work’ (Tyler, 2011)—physically, socially, and morally so—because associated with people belonging to marginalized communities. This work has also been symbolically associated (Ashcraft, 2013) with sexual connotations, leading to the maid’s body being seen as an abject body.

The artifact is made of bronze and painted white, in contrast to the other bodies analyzed in this article. According to the artists, this variation was intentional—the choice of material aimed to elicit empathy from visitors and encourage identification with the maid and her situation (Elmgreen & Dragset, 2019). As a feminist white woman, I found this artwork-body thought-provoking and rich with multiple meanings.



FIGURE 5 Pregnant white maid.

The white color of the maid's body activated a process of defamiliarization (Braidotti, 2017)—a disidentification and disengagement from dominant racialized assumptions about work(ers). The white color of the maid's body contrasts with the familiar scene in which maids typically belong to racial minority groups. This aspect of the installation reveals how occupations are affiliated to collective identities (Ashcraft, 2013) and prompted critical questions about racialized capitalism, with its externalization of care work and devaluation of reproductive labor (Braidotti, 2013; Fraser, 2016).

In today's neoliberal, globalized world, the value and materiality of the body reflect and reproduce geographical and class inequalities (Zulfikar & Prasad, 2022). Drawing from Butler, numerous studies have shown that for Western women to compete in the workplace, they must 'do gender' by adhering to masculine work standards (Bruni et al., 2000). As a result, work that is traditionally considered feminine has been devalued and outsourced to other women, typically from the Global South, who experience greater forms of misrecognition. These women's "less-than-women" bodies are often forced to migrate and leave their families behind in search of better working conditions (Ehrenreich et al., 2003). Their care work has become the driving force behind women's emancipation in the Global North (Arruzza et al., 2019).

Along these lines, Zulfikar and Prasad (2022) have investigated the intersectionality of gender, race, and class in defining certain bodies as more appropriate for "dirty" work than others. For example, low-caste toilet cleaners in Pakistan were considered suitable for abject labor due to their status in society. The historical portrayal of domestic workers as lascivious and sexually available also reinforced their occupational stigma. Similarly, Huopainen and Satama (2019) have shown how the maternal body's construction as an abject body is mediated by race, class, and sexuality. White, heterosexual, and middle-class women have opportunities to pursue both an academic career and motherhood that are not as readily available to women belonging to marginalized communities.

The contrast between the bodies of knowledge workers—featured in the *Garden of Eden*—and those involved in reproduction processes highlights the class differences that exist in the current digitalized work regime. While knowledge workers often work in intangible, digital realms, those involved in reproduction work, such as domestic workers or caregivers, have to physically engage with the bodies of others, often with low pay and little recognition for their labor. In this respect, Braidotti argues that the human body is constructed by excluding and dehumanizing certain groups who are

seen as “less-than-human” (Braidotti, 2020, 2). These bodies become disposable and denied the status of the human body. Braidotti also argues that the maternal body has been relegated to an abject status, perpetuating the dominant materialization of difference. However, unlike Butler, Braidotti sees the monstrosity of the maternal body as possessing a vitalist and affirmative quality that suggests alternative figurations of embodiment (Braidotti, 1994). Thus, encountering the pregnant white maid prompts reflection on how organizing practices grounded in an ethics of recognition might contest cultural norms and imaginaries that cast some bodies as abject. This also involves calling into question the naturalized association of complex and valuable work with the “disembodied professional” (Ashcraft, 2013, p. 23). An ethics of recognition calls for recognizing the multiplicity of bodily differences and how emerging technologies can transform existing possibilities of embodiment, including but not limited to our experience of motherhood.

5.4 | The outsiders: On precarious bodies

While wandering outside the closed exhibition rooms, I unexpectedly came across a car (Figure 6). This encounter piqued my curiosity and compelled me to take a closer look inside—a moment of poetic suspense when the breath is held (Linstead, 2018). Inside the car, two young men embracing each other with their eyes closed evoked both sleep



FIGURE 6 The outsiders.



FIGURE 7 The outsiders.

and death (Figure 7). The packages inside the car suggested that they might be workers taking a break before starting work again.

The installation's title, *The outsiders*, carries both a material and ontological meaning. The two men represent the constitutive Other of the subject (Butler, 1997)—the heterosexual worker of the formal economy. Two intertwined regimes of intelligibility are at play here, the heterosexual matrix and the capitalist matrix (Butler, 1998). The combination of these two matrices provides the foundation for Butler's ethical-political theory, which is further developed in her latest work.

Central to Butler's work is the concept of precarity (Butler, 2004b). The car, the bodies, and their work all serve as powerful materializations of this idea. Precarity, according to Butler, is an existential condition (precariousness) of interdependency that is inherent to the human condition. Simultaneously, precarity is also politically induced and material as it is the result of processes of privative dispossession (Butler & Athanasiou, 2013).

The Russian license plate on the car hints at the legal context in which homosexuality is denied recognition, including the right to exist. This materializes into job and life insecurity, making the bodies of the two men in the car vulnerable to the curiosity (and potential violence) of passersby. This installation highlights the intertwined relationship between precarity and workers' embodied identity.

Precarious bodies struggle to find their place in normative formal economies. This installation sheds light on the vulnerability and precarity of homosexual bodies and on how these materialize in their work and 'absent presence' in organizational spaces (Ward & Winstanley, 2003).

The exhibition brochure hints that these workers may have contributed to the art exhibition, raising ethical questions about my role as a consumer and the value I give to the work that went into this exhibition. It also questions my role in defining the regimes of intelligibility that make bodies (not) matter.

The exhibition once again engages with Butler's work and posthumanism (Braidotti, 2013), which explains abjection as a naturalization process that dehumanizes certain bodies by reducing them to 'bare lives' (Agamben, 1998). The sleeping bodies of the two workers highlight that "gender, labor and class relations are crucial in structuring access to adequate sleep" (Braidotti, 2022, 46), revealing broader socioeconomic inequalities.

Abjection is also linked to death—the closed eyes of the two workers evoke sleeping but also death. In this respect, Butler (2022) asks why some deaths are more grievable than others. Recognition is a constitutive element

of necropolitics, as the latter defines an unequal distribution of the dignity of mourning. The bodies of these homosexual workers are “ungrievable” bodies; their lives are other than lives (Butler, 2009). As observed by Butler (2022), the recognition of the dignity of mourning has implications for “how we think about health care, imprisonment, war, occupation, and citizenship, all of which make distinctions between populations as more and less grievable” (p. 58). This artwork suggests that necropolitics has also implications for our understanding of the present and future of work(ers). Considered from the perspective of an ethics of interdependency, these precarious bodies raise questions around how organizational processes and practices can be transformed to reduce the precarity of these bodies, that is, to provide systemic protection and safety nets without which these bodies are reduced to unrecognized and disposable bodies.

6 | DISCUSSION

This paper explores how art can enhance our understanding of the significance of bodies, a topic that has garnered increasing interest in the field of work and organization studies. Through the exhibition of four different forms of embodiment—the posthuman body, the abject body, the ideal body, and the precarious body—the artworks generated critical momentum (Linstead, 2018) and reflection on the hegemonic construction of the working body as a body that does (not) matter.

The *Garden of Eden* materializes a posthuman working space that prompts us to examine how new technological advancements are transforming our work lives and how they can potentially promote more inclusive and equitable work environments free from gendered norms of appearance. *The Touch* exposes how bodily norms of fitness and health shape the valuation of working bodies, which are being transformed into genetic and bio-informatic data under biogenetic capitalism (Braidotti, 2013; Clough, 2008). Simultaneously, the phenomenological experience of touching and being touched highlighted in *The Touch* provides a basis for an ethics of interdependency that acknowledges the interconnectedness of our bodies (Butler, 2011, 2015). *The Pregnant White Maid* prompts us to consider how certain working bodies are constructed as abject and monstrous, casting a critical light on the devaluation of traditionally feminine (care) work. Lastly, *The Outsiders* scrutinizes the transformation of working bodies into precarious bodies due to the lack of a safety net, calling to mind the theme of the invisibility of work present in all of the artifacts.

Building upon a rich tradition in organization studies (Alferoff & Knights, 2003; Cohen et al., 2006; Gagliardi, 1999; Linstead, 2018; Pouthier & Sondak, 2021; Strati, 2010; Taylor & Hansen, 2005; Tyler & Cohen, 2010; Warren, 2008), this paper argues that art has an intrinsic ethical dimension that is closely intertwined with its esthetic dimension. The esthetic and embodied experience of encountering the artworks prompts to recognize our interdependency by initiating processes of (dis)identification and eliciting a sense of empathy and responsibility for the lives of others.

Within a posthuman perspective, “identity is not much crafted as it happens” (Ashcraft, 2020, p. 849). Similarly, the recognition of ethical interdependency *happens* through the contingent encounters with and within the art installation. These bodily encounters (Ashcraft, 2020) activate an embodied visceral ethics wherein responsibility is felt through the senses rather than logically deduced from generally established principles of conduct. Such an ethics of interdependency is both vitalist, by returning to the body and materiality, and critical by challenging the naturalization of a very particular kind of ‘human’ as the only viable subject. In this respect, the ethical potential of artistic artifacts lies in their “visionary energy” (Åsberg & Braidotti, 2018, p. 3), their capacity to generate “bodily imagery” (Ashcraft, 2013, p. 9), and their active engagement of exhibition visitors in “posthuman imaginaries” (Åsberg & Braidotti, 2018, p. 3). The art exhibition *happens*, it consists of these bodily encounters that activate critical reflection on which workers and types of work matter, and in doing so, it highlights the limitations and possibilities of organizational practices and processes. An ethics of interdependency calls for organizational practices that prioritize shared vulnerability over independence and autonomy. Instead of individualistic approaches to diversity (Rottenberg, 2018) that leave workers to adapt to an unchanged system, we need to redefine our organizational practices to cultivate relations of care both within and outside of the workplace. *The Outsiders* testifies that the precarious subject is a

result of sociomaterial production. The car, their clothes, the work they (cannot) do, their corporal experience of sleep deprivation, and the perception of the passersby all contribute to the construction of precarity, a process that is both symbolic and material (Ashcraft, 2013). Livable and grievable lives (Butler, 2022) can be achieved by addressing the sociomaterial processes that hinder fair compensation, adequate safety measures, and the recognition of the value of diversity. Future research on precarious work might focus on understanding these sociomaterial processes, shifting attention from the individual experience of precarity to the underlying structural conditions through which precarity materializes.

An ethics of interdependency also values care work embodied in the art exhibition by the *Pregnant white maid*, which has historically been devalued due to its non-conformity with masculine ideals of work. As highlighted by Ashcraft (2013), "diversifying occupations begins with creative reconstruction of the identity of work itself" (p. 2012). Future studies may delve into how valuing interdependency can help us redefine the relationship between work, its identity, and the embodied identity of those who perform the work. For instance, what kind of identity could a work(er)/occupation acquire if we evaluate it based on the interdependency it preserves?

Another related and important consideration is how to organize practices that respect and preserve global interdependence. A posthumanist ethics emphasizes the importance of protecting life beyond the traditional human perspective (Braidotti, 2022; Butler, 2022). Therefore, corporate sustainability programs can be rethought with this ethical understanding of global interdependency in mind. This includes valuing the work and workers of the Global South by recognizing the intersectionality of diversity. Also, it requires protecting and preserving those elements that sustain our bodily interdependency, such as the air we breathe (Butler, 2022).

Thus, imagining alternative ways of valuing work and workers extends beyond what is traditionally seen as the workplace. As seen in *The Touch*, these valorization processes blur any distinction between 'life' and 'work,' as what is valued as meaningful work results from sociomaterial and discursive struggles involving a variety of actors, places, and research communities. In the context of genetic bio-capitalism (Cooper, 2008), these struggles involve a range of (post)human actors, including genetic data, biotechnology and pharmaceutical companies, life science researchers, and laboratories. Consequently, future organization studies will need to engage more with science and technology studies to better grasp the role of bodies and materiality in the emergence of subjectivity (Åsberg & Braidotti, 2018).

Lastly, organization studies may explore what sociomaterial assemblages do to and with (gender) non-conforming bodies. We have only just begun to explore alternatives to heteronormativity and binarism. Imagining creative modalities of embodiment beyond gender is central to this affirmative ethics of posthuman feminism (Braidotti, 2022). Once we acknowledge that vulnerability and interdependency are not unique to some bodies but are rather common and shared, we can begin to dismantle social norms that have constructed some bodies as abject, such as it is the case for disabled bodies and gender-nonconforming bodies. As *Garden of Eden* epitomizes, our bodies are increasingly becoming socio-technical bodies, and their possibilities are yet to be explored.

7 | CONCLUDING REMARKS

The paper makes a threefold contribution to work and organization studies.

First, the paper puts Butler and Braidotti's work into dialog to form the basis of an ethico-political project that can redefine how we live together. In doing so, the study adds to the emerging work and organization literature that brings together Butler's work on the body and a posthumanist perspective on materiality (Harding et al., 2017, 2022; Hultin & Introna, 2019). It extends these studies by proposing to explore both, bodies and materiality, through the lenses of an affirmative and critical ethics of interdependency. This posthuman critical ethics can offer an alternative horizon for interrogating our organizational practices and imagining alternative relationships between life, technology, labor, and bodies.

Second, it adds to the sparse literature on the ethical value of artistic artifacts for our understanding of work and organization (Cohen et al., 2006; Cohen & Tyler, 2004; Pouthier & Sondak, 2021). While previous studies have

acknowledged this potential, this paper goes further by demonstrating how art can contribute to cultivating an ethics of interdependency. An art exhibition is a playground (Deleuze & Guattari, 1984) where “semi-conscious, transpersonal bodily encounters” occur (Ashcraft, 2020, p. 859), opening up imaginaries (Åsberg & Braidotti, 2018) that challenge our taken-for-granted understandings of reality. This sensorial embodied and situated experience is the source of both ethical imagination and responsibility, thus challenging a dominant view of ethics as the result of abstract and logical reasoning.

Third, the paper proposes a methodological approach grounded in the ethics of interdependency. This approach goes beyond research based on abstract reasoning, neutrality, and objectivity (Fotaki et al., 2014; Sinclair, 2019). Building on Linstead (2018), I argued that the ‘ethical moment’ originates from a sensorial experience of interdependency and vulnerability. This ethical inquiry is corporeal (Pullen & Rhodes, 2014) and arises through encounters with the (human, non-human, sub-human) Other (Braidotti, 2022; Butler, 2000, 2020). As researchers, we always encounter the other we study, even when this encounter is mediated by statistical abstractions. Therefore, to conduct ethical research, which is grounded in an ethics of interdependency, we must ask what we owe to each other and how we can preserve the lives of others through our research.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from Fondazione Prada. Restrictions apply to the availability of these data, which were used under license for this study. Data are available from the author(s) with the permission of Fondazione Prada.

ORCID

Daniela Pianezzi  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4880-8351>

ENDNOTE

¹ I have obtained copyright authorization from Fondazione Prada for all the pictures used in this article.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Daniela Pianezzi is Senior Lecturer in Organization Studies at the University of Verona, Italy. She is also visiting scholar at the University of Essex (UK) and at the Scuola Superiore Sant'Anna of Pisa. Her works have been published in various international journals, including *Work, Employment and Society*, *Journal of Business Ethics*, *Human Relations*, *Critical Perspectives on Accounting*. She is a member of the editorial board for *Organization* and the *Journal of Accounting in Emerging Economies* (JAEE), co-funder of the research center *RE-WORK: Researching for REmaking Work and Organizing*, and member of the *Research Center on the Politics and Theories of Sexuality - POLITESSE* of the University of Verona.

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