

Book Reviews

Artifacts and Organizations: Beyond Mere Symbolism.
Anat Rafaeli and Michael G. Pratt, eds. Mahwah, NJ: LEA,
2006. 344 pp. \$99.95.

The study of corporate artifacts and space arose at the end of the 1980s in Europe as one of the most original outcomes of the more general intellectual movement born at the end of the 1970s—known as “organizational symbolism” or the “cultural turn” in organization studies—that analyzes organizations as “cultures,” “meaning systems,” or “symbolic fields.” Moreover, from the outset, artifacts and physical reality in organizations have been viewed by the mainly European scholars who have undertaken their study (Gagliardi, 1990; Ramirez, 1991; Strati, 1992) not just as one of the systems of signification operating in organizations but also, and especially, as the products and vehicles of a fundamental human experience, namely, aesthetic experience. The aesthetic approach has developed as a distinct strand within the symbolist movement because it does not share the latter’s predominantly cognitivist orientation. Instead, it reassesses the role played in organizational dynamics by sensory experience, that is, by forms of knowledge and action outside the domain of rational understanding and articulation: tacit and ineffable, rather than intellectual knowledge; expressive and disinterested behavior shaped by feelings rather than by practical ends.

In recent years the aesthetic approach has developed apace in Europe, as testified especially by special journal issues (*Organization*, 1996: vol. 3, no. 2; *Human Relations*, 2002: vol. 55, no. 7), books (e.g., Strati, 1999), and research anthologies (e.g., Linstead and Höpfl, 2000). The book edited by Rafaeli and Pratt reviewed here—a research anthology to which the large majority of contributors are North Americans or of North American training—represents the voice of contemporary scholarship on corporate artifacts in the United States, and it demonstrates that such scholarship is characterized by epistemological and methodological concerns rather different from those that have inspired European scholars of the same matters. These differences seem of little account on reading the first three chapters in part 1: Rafaeli and Vilnai-Yavetz’s “Managing Artifacts to Avoid Artifact Myopia,” Strati’s “Organizational Artifacts and the Aesthetic Approach,” and Yanow’s “Studying Physical Artifacts: An Interpretive Approach.” These three chapters appear to state the aims and set the tone of the entire book, given that they are frequently cited by the authors of the subsequent chapters. But the differences appear increasingly marked as one continues to read through the book. In their excellent contribution, Rafaeli and Vilnai-Yavetz convincingly argue that artifacts have an aesthetic dimension besides the instrumental and symbolic ones. Yet the aesthetic dimension, although it is nominally treated by various contributors, is central to only one of the chapters—the one that immediately follows, written by Strati. This is a nice analysis of an art performance as an ephemeral artifact that nevertheless leaves traces of itself in organizational processes. But Strati, not coincidentally, is one of the leading European theorists of the aesthetic approach. Also the pragmatic dimension of artifacts, especial-

ly in its relation to the other dimensions, is generally undervalued in the book. The dominant approach of the large majority of the chapters is conversely the symbolic-cognitivist perspective, which European research seems to have left behind.

Even within the symbolic-cognitivist perspective, however, North American research on artifacts displays a number of peculiarities. While the European tradition treats the study of the meaning of artifacts, like other categories of symbols, as inextricably bound up with an interpretive approach and qualitative methods of inquiry, in this anthology, fully four chapters recounting empirical research—Elsbach's "Perceptual Biases and Misinterpretation of Artifacts," Anand's "Cartoon Displays as Autoproduction of Organizational Culture," Baruch's "On Logos and Business Cards: The Case of UK Universities," Glynn and Marquis's "Fred's Bank: How Institutional Norms and Individual Preferences Legitimate Organizational Names"—adopt a tendentially positivist research model. They formulate hypotheses about relations between meaning (the dependent variable) and other factors (independent variables), and they test these hypotheses by measuring—with a statistical apparatus or, as in Baruch's chapter, "by rule of thumb"—data collected with standardized instruments. All these chapters seemingly share the assumption that artifacts have an intrinsic and ontological semiotic status, that is, they constitute systems of signs interpretable on the basis of a self-evident and universal grammar. Artifacts may therefore be "misinterpreted," or their meanings may be declined according to objective categorizations as a function of the specific features of the senders or the receivers. As often happens when research methods are inadequate for the study of the phenomenon being investigated (in this case, the meaning of artifacts), the hypotheses formulated and tested are disconcertingly obvious. Paradoxically, in two cases, the authors (Anand and Baruch) declare that they have been inspired by the interpretive approach that Yanow claims—in one of the three chapters cited above as the "reference" chapters for the entire book—is indispensable for the study of artifacts, her argument being that "... because the focus is on meaning-centered research, both presuppositions and methods are interpretive, rather than those informed by positivist philosophies" (p. 43).

What, therefore, is the sense of the book's subtitle, "Beyond Mere Symbolism"? The multidisciplinary approach advocated by the editors and their invitation to integrate three different strands of research on artifacts—(1) technology and human factors engineering, attending to instrumentality; (2) architecture, industrial design, and fine arts, focusing on aesthetics; and (3) communication studies and semiotics, pertaining to symbolism—seem to be dictated not by an intent to promote new theoretical developments but by the practical necessity of considering all three dimensions while designing and managing artifacts. The book's main target audience is therefore professionals (ergonomists, designers, communications experts) induced by their specialization to neglect aspects unfamiliar to them and, more generally, managers. In many of the chapters, whenever the empirical materials described or

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the reflections developed afford the opportunity, the reader is reminded that artifacts are vehicles of intentions and instruments of action and that these are often used unconsciously. Errors in their management—termed “artifact myopia”—give rise to economic losses, psychological costs, discredit, and delegitimation. The two distinctive features of the book, therefore, are its cognitivist emphasis and its managerial standpoint. Its readers will become more aware of the various factors to bear in mind when equipping an office, and they will gain a clearer idea of the benefits to be gained, for instance, by laying down corporate dress guidelines. Hence, the book is the first attempt to give systematic treatment to the role of artifacts in the management of specific organizational problems: the construction of collective identity, strategies of communication with the market and the environment, and the creation of work settings that foster behaviors consistent with corporate purposes.

Besides being one of the book's distinctive features, this corporate standpoint explains a further difference between these studies and recent developments in European research. Their awareness that artifacts convey sensory and aesthetic experiences has induced European scholars to consider the use of “landscaping” as a potential instrument of control and domination that is all the more effective and subtle because it is experienced unconsciously. These emancipatory concerns appear to be absent from the book. One of the chapters (Harquail's “Employees as Animate Artifacts: Wearing the Brand”) discusses the possibility of bending the external appearance and inner attitude of employees to the needs of the branding process. While, on the one hand, it considers the selection of employees by race or gender to be politically incorrect, on the other, it apparently does not deem ethically questionable a project to have employees automatically and uncritically embody the brand of the company for which they work. If anything, the problem is solely technical: according to Harquail, the question is understanding the extent to which the advantages for the company offset the human costs. Comparison between this chapter and two European studies on the same topic (Hancock and Tyler, 2000; Witz, Warhurst, and Nickson, 2003)—of which Harquail is unaware, or at any rate does not cite—highlights the radical difference among the ideological and epistemological options taken in studying the same phenomenon.

The book is well structured. An introduction describes its organization into four parts—1: “Knowing Artifacts,” 2: “Artifacts and Knowledge,” 3: “Artifacts, Brands, and Identity,” and 4: “Artifacts and Legitimacy”—while a conclusion indicates directions for future research. Each part is introduced in its turn, and both the introductions and the conclusion make constant cross-references to materials and topics treated in the various chapters. The editors do their best to guide the reader and to impose a logic on the book's structure, but they have to cope with the markedly uneven quality of their building blocks. The merits of the studies by Rafaeli and Vilnai-Yavetz, Strati, and Yanow have already been mentioned and so have the shortcomings of those by Elsbach, Anand, Harquail, Baruch (strangely forgotten by the editors in their

initial overview, which lists thirteen chapters, not fourteen), and Glynn and Marquis. The study by Carlile ("Artifacts and Knowledge Negotiation across Domains") is the best in the second part: it efficaciously illustrates the nature of the boundary objects that act as both barriers and membranes, incorporating and mediating knowledge among diverse professional groups. But the chapter by Cunliffe and Shotter ("Linguistic Artifacts in Organizing and Managing") adds nothing new to what has already been said about leadership as a "linguistic game" and the "management of meaning." The chapter by Schultz, Hatch, and Cicoletta ("Brand Life in Symbols and Artifacts: The LEGO Company"), which opens the third part, is a good illustration of the importance of objects, together with abstract statements, in the management of corporate branding. Cappetta and Gioia's "Fine Fashion: Using Symbolic Artifacts, Sensemaking, and Sensegiving to Construct Identity and Image" is an opportunity missed: the requirement not to reveal the identities of the two fashion houses studied impoverishes the ethnographic account and prevents the reader from fully evaluating the authors' assertions about the role of artifacts in the definition of organizational identity. The fourth part of the book contains two chapters of particular interest: Fiol and O'Connor's "Stuff Matters: Artifacts, Social Identity, and Legitimacy in the U.S. Medical Profession" and Kaghan and Lounsbury's "Artifacts, Articulation Work, and Institutional Residue." The former is altogether the most outstanding chapter in the book: convincingly and with ample documentation, it shows that artifacts are at once drivers and reflections of changing social relations. The latter is a further interesting example of how artifacts are implicated in the development and maintenance of a state of collective mind. In both chapters, the focus on the instrumental, symbolic, and aesthetic characteristics of artifacts enables proximal description of the processes by which institutionalized realities are constructed and reproduced. From this point of view, these two chapters make a significant contribution to remedying a traditional shortcoming of American neo-institutionalism.

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