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A Review for the Boss

Book review of *Wirtschaftsästhetik. Wie Unternehmen die Kunst als Inspiration und Werkzeug nutzen, Wiesbaden* by Brigitte Biehl-Missal (Gabler, 2011)

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Its a funny thing to review a book that has been written by the chair of the review section from the journal the review is going to be published in.

There are not many possibilities. Either I slash the book in order to gain credibility from the reader; or I sweet-talk in order to get the review published.

Fortunately the book is not in need of peer-pressure based sweet-talk, in order to receive a truly good review. – (Nice move, isn't it?)

Ultimately I could enjoy myself and write about something completely else. Now, me, being an artist, who is supposed to have a big ego, I am tempted by the last possibility. Because a second factor puts as a by-product an interesting issue on the table. Ninety-five percent of the people who might take a look at this review will never be able to read the book. Because it is written in German.

Such a review secretly talks more about the state of affairs in Germany. In this case it is welcome, that Brigitte Biehl-Missal's book is out now for some time, published in 2011.

Wirtschaftsästhetik. For the English speaking fellow the title of the book appears as one of those typical German monsters of a word, even with the funny dots above the a. It correctly suggests its central purpose: Giving a thorough overview of a field which might come under the headline of Organizational Aesthetics in English. Organizational would translate into German "organization", so the fine distinction lies in *Wirtschaft* – a term which is located somewhere between economy, business and corporations. Brigitte is keen to keep a double-sided view on the subject. "The role of the arts remains ambivalent; the methods help to change and improve as well as to manipulate (...) Under the headline of inspiration we are guided by the idea that art is not only used, but engages in a productive interplay with the corporation (...)" (p.9). That balancing act is remarkable and distinguishes the book from the yeah-lets-go-for-it rhetoric of some of the more applied literature in the field. It might come at the cost of not making a decision at all, but for my taste the book manages the magic trick.

Thank God that Brigitte published it, because an overview of Organizational Aesthetics and its applied use was deeply needed for the German speaking! There have been a few interesting publications in the years before (Chodzinski, 2007; Markowski and Wöbken, 2007; Tröndle and Warmers, 2011), but a book to relate to the up-to-date international discourse was missing.

In this sense the book takes on the challenge of different tasks: 1. Sketching out the framework of aesthetics for organizations (pedigree and epistemology, methods), and 2. describing their aesthetic dimensions (aesthetic and emotional work; product design; architecture including corporate buildings, office spaces, and retail atmospheres). It comes then to talk about 3. the metaphors from the arts field used in corporate context (manager as an artist; organizations as orchestras and jazz bands; organization as theatre; manager as performer; storytelling), and enters what I would see as the main part: 4. the listing of the arts based methods that are used for employee and organizational development (painting; organizational theatre; poetry; literature; music including corporate songs; sculpture). The shortest part 5. talks about the artists' perspective on the world of corporations with an emphasis on artistic resistance of those who do not wish to co-operate with organizations.

Wirtschaftsästhetik is clearly a benchmark book, and it's a must-read for students touching the gravitation field of Organizational Aesthetics. I especially enjoyed the knowledgeable part on literature and poetry, for instance with the Jabberwocky quote taken from Morgan et al. (2010). On the other hand, the artists' perspective on the subject is a rather sketchy chapter, it is questionable if the book needs it at all. Sure, for the above mentioned balancing act it needs to be there. And Brigitte mentions it herself in the introduction of the chapter, that general research work needs to be done, this perspective is still underdeveloped. Cooperations with art historians and art critics would be the option. (In Copenhagen Daniel Birnbaum cooperating now with the CBS is one good sign towards it.)

Brigitte knows the ropes. She delivers a knowledgeable and readable book. Plus the treasure of a eleven-page-small-printed bibliography – leaving hardly any literature out which has been relevant in the last 30 years.

The book targets clearly also the non-academic reader, offering a map into the field. One imagines the German-only speaking business man (does exist!), who grabs the phone and calls in an artist after reading *Wirtschaftsästhetik*. So it is interesting to see that Brigitte humbles the reader by not translating English quotes here and there, in good academic tradition. I always loved the non-translated Latin quotes which showed me my place.

The book was a truly refreshing read. It gave me my appetite back to venture again into organizational-studies-academia, after the art world embraced and smothered me in the last years. Brigitte's book is on its journey, and I am sure that this seed finds its soil.

Although, as Germans go, they have a hard time to just not divide the real, true and only philosophy (or aesthetics) from its application. Brigitte moved on and worked as a lecturer in the UK. What a loss for Germany! But the book remains. And Brigitte will be back as well.

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About the Author

Henrik Schrat has studied Painting and Stage Design in Dresden, Germany, and completed a Master in Fine Art Media at the Slade School in London in 2002. In 2011 he has finished a doctorate at Essex Business School, University of Essex. He has shown his work internationally in Group and Solo Shows, among others in *Global Players* (Tokio, 2005), *Eat the Food*, (MOCCA, Toronto) 2007). Schrat's visual work has focused on site specific narrative murals and drawing work with comic as multi-use-format. His latest narrative visuals have extended to wood inlay work, confronting the slow traditional technique with comic style and contemporary content. He teaches and lectures on the topic of art & business, has curated the project *Product & Vision* (Berlin, 2005, Kunstfabrik am Flutgraben) and edited the reader *Sophisticated Survival Techniques. Strategies in Art & Business*. Schrat lives and works in Berlin.



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