

Call for papers

Art as alternative organising

**Critical Management Studies beyond the Academy? 30th June – 2nd July 2027,
Lancaster University**

Session Type: In-person

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Art has long been a topic of consideration within management and organisation studies, specifically through the work of critical management studies (CMS) scholars. Artforms of various types have been recognised as not just generative spaces of organisational insight (e.g., in Biehl-Missal, 2015; Carroll & Smolović Jones, 2018; Janssen & Steyaert, 2019; Kärreman, 2001; Lasala et al., 2023; Sicca, 2000; Yanow, 2001), but as providing alternative modes of epistemic engagement through counter-hegemonic, anti-capitalist, feminist and decolonial thought and action in and around organisations (Biehl and Schönfeld, 2023; Pagan & Zaeemdar, 2024; Hughes, 2024; Mandalaki and Daou, 2021). At the same time, art-based inquiry highlights the limits of approaches that privilege the visible, textual, and readily representable, foregrounding instead what is sensed, sounded, performed, and atmospherically felt in and around organising (Harding & Ford, 2025; Jørgensen & Beyes, 2023; Longman & Villesèche, 2026; Strati, 1999). However, this is not always an easy exchange, and residual questions remain. Does the use of art within CMS obfuscate art and aesthetics by viewing it through the lens of what it contributes to organisational knowledge? What refuses to be defined (Holt, 2023)? Do we fundamentally miss something intrinsic about art when we instrumentalise it in the service of organising and the critique of management (Beyes et al., 2019)? This stream engages with the two halves of a dialectical tension and central conundrum within the field: CMS clearly derives important insight and engagement through the arts that must be further explored and defined, but we may be, in

doing so, reducing undefinable aesthetic engagement into something didactic and instrumental. Our task, in this stream, is to traverse the two halves of this dialectical tension.

Towards the first element, we can productively categorise our ways of thinking about the interface between art and organisations into different domains. An established stream of interpretative and critical management and organisation studies uses art, in a variety of forms, to make sense of organising practices, organisational spaces, and the construction of the identities of organisation members. This literature has evolved in connection to the aesthetic turn in organisation studies (Strati, 1999, 2007, 2018; Taylor & Hansen, 2005) which explores sensory and symbolic organisational phenomena and experiences. Notable examples include Goffman-inspired studies informed by an analogical framing of organisation “as theatre” (e.g., Mangham & Overington, 1987; Manning, 2008; Whittle et al., 2021) or by understandings of organisations as literary narratives (McCarroll and Hassard, 2024). Another, emergent, body of CMS focuses on the use of art within organisations, in particular in management learning and education (Statler & Guillet de Monthoux, 2015; Mandalaki et al., 2021). These studies have explored various modes of the design, implementation, and the impacts of art-based interventions—incorporated in business school curricula and corporate training and development—from literature (Martin et al., 2018; Michaelson, 2016), to painting (Adler, 2015), films and TV (Ayikoru & Park, 2019; Biehl, 2023; Panayiotou, 2015; 2010), animation (Griffin et al, 2018), and theatre (Badham et al, 2016; Clark & Mangham, 2004; Dickinson, Hadjimichael & Panayiotou, 2026; Meisiek & Barry, 2007; Pierce & Zaeemdar, 2024; Zaeemdar, 2017). The scope of this approach to the use of art as organisational intervention has gone beyond the academy, involving practitioners, not only those in the higher education sector, but also those active in corporate and public spaces. Further exploration of the arts as alternative organisational practice is one of the aims of this stream.

The second task set out for this stream is potentially more challenging, and pushes us to think, in a different way, beyond the limits of what ‘good’ social science is. One approach to this question has been in the “doing, writing, and disseminating research differently” turn in CMS. This turn has opened yet another avenue of inquiry advocating for the use of art-based methods in the field (Boncori et al., 2025; Panayiotou, 2021a; 2021b; Ward & Shortt, 2020). The powerful potential offered by this alternative epistemic approach offers a mode of aesthetic expression beyond the confines of ordinary academic research, often including poetry, creative writing, and other forms of art. Yet, another approach seeks to identify what about art escapes reification through academic codification, often relying on established critical theory. Sometimes critical theory has indeed engaged with this element through

conceptual terms, in different ways: “the excess” (Bataille, 1988/1967: 10) or the “aesthetic dimension” (Rancière, 2009). To this end, we actively encourage papers that consider the arts beyond what is academically legible.

We welcome papers that deal with what these formulations, as discussed, add to our understanding of the arts and organising. At the same time, we welcome papers that challenge or reject any separation between art and social criticism: what if these notions are simply naive romanticisations that fail to recognise the inherent connection between culture and criticism, and the material conditions and basis of art itself (Adorno, 1948/1998)? What if there is nothing “outside” of what can be captured as organising practice?

We have outlined several sub-themes below, through which we invite participants to critically engage with understanding, practising, and engaging with art – as an organising practice or a sensemaking tool, as well as contributions that use art to push beyond what is “organisable” or “manageable”. We welcome abstracts, of **500 words**, that consider the wider question of the arts and organising, or that focus on one specific genre (sci-fi, post-modernism, realism), mode (TV, film, novels, dance, poetry, theatre, painting, music) or artistic artefact (a specific play, painting or artist, for example):

1. How are arts used within organising spaces?
 - a. Arts as a method, or intervention against hegemonic (academic/activist/organising) practice
 - b. Arts as a mode of political organising (e.g., arts as activism, or used in activist spaces; agitprop - i.e., can art be used as an instrument to politically organise?)
 - c. Is art assimilated into these spaces? Can this be problematised? Can the arts be a radical intervention *against* organising?
2. What is art beyond organising?
 - a. What escapes? What about art lies beyond organising? Why is this so? Is this important? Why is this important?
 - b. How might attention to sound, rhythm, silence, gesture, atmosphere, and embodied attunement re-specify what ‘escapes’ – and with what political stakes (e.g., regimes of audibility/visibility and whose voices/bodies become perceptible in organising)?
 - c. How does CMS engage with concepts such as the ‘aesthetic encounter’ (Rancière), ‘immanence’ (Adorno), and ‘excess’ (Bataille)?
3. How can the arts be used as a way to re-understand organisations?

- a. Pedagogic case studies that go beyond the ordinary – where have the arts challenged and gone beyond academic practice?
 - b. Arts that push and go beyond the reach of academic research, or flourish by occupying the margins of “the Academy” (how can academia be operationalised against itself through art?)
- 4. Theoretical approaches on art, challenging how it relates to organisations; e.g., poststructuralism, the Frankfurt School, interpretivist and sensemaking approaches, psychoanalytic, feminist, and decolonial ways of expressing what falls outside of normative pedagogy, etc.

Supporting detail on the stream/session

Abstracts of up to **500-words** should be sent to kathleen.hughes@aru.ac.uk by **1 December 2026** in **MS Word** or **PDF format**. Abstracts proposing alternative formats of contribution on the day (e.g. performance, music composition, audio-visual or other modes of artistic expression, etc.) are welcome, so long as the proposed formats are accessible. If your conference presentation requires any specific requirements in terms of space, technology, equipment, etc., please clearly outline this in your abstract. This stream accepts in-person presentations only.

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