

# With Latour in Our Hands

## Discovering the Politics of Organizing and the Aesthetic Matter of Things

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*Document Version*

Final published version

*Published in:*

Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management

*DOI:*

[10.1108/QROM-06-2024-2757](https://doi.org/10.1108/QROM-06-2024-2757)

*Publication date:*

2024

*License*

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*Citation for published version (APA):*

Raviola, E., & Gasparin, M. (2024). With Latour in Our Hands: Discovering the Politics of Organizing and the Aesthetic Matter of Things. *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management*, 19(5), 35-53.  
<https://doi.org/10.1108/QROM-06-2024-2757>

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Download date: 23. Apr. 2025



# With Latour in our hands: discovering the politics of organizing and the aesthetic matter of things

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Qualitative  
Research in  
Organizations and  
Management: An  
International  
Journal

35

Received 11 June 2024  
Revised 11 June 2024  
Accepted 11 June 2024

## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to pay tribute to the work of Bruno Latour and its relevance for organization scholars particularly, by relentlessly going beyond the reified category of “organization.” We rely in particular on our own experiences of conducting fieldwork with Latour in our hands and expose our journeys, sometimes feeling naked, embarrassed and naive. By following traces of actions, paying attention to things and appreciating plurality, with Latour we have discovered the politics of organizing and the aesthetic matter of things.

**Design/methodology/approach** – We use our own methodological experience to describe how Latour’s work has helped us concretely. We structure our methodological reasoning around three excursions in the field, corresponding to our different fieldwork journeys. For each excursion, we rely on descriptions and reflect on how we have traced actions, paid attention to things and appreciated plurality, as set out in the introduction.

**Findings** – We render through excursions our Latour moments, that is, critical moments in fieldwork, where we get stuck and embarrassed and where Latour’s texts with simple questions help us move. Against the critique of ANT as being apolitical and unable to account for the body, we explain how we have precisely, through our ANT investigations, intersected between politics, aesthetics and organizing through three main ways of displacing us in the field: leaving *a priori* categories and questioning what we see; placing our view somewhere and moving it in an oligopticon-like way; and “thick thinging.”

**Originality/value** – The paper is a tribute to Latour’s work and wants to contribute to emphasizing his relevance for understanding not only organization in general but also the politics and aesthetics of organizing. We reassemble our fieldwork journeys and, despite their being personal to us, we believe that our learnings are recognizable and recognized by other scholars. We conclude with a research suggestion relevant to organization scholars.

**Keywords** Organizing, Politics, Design, Aesthetics, Actor–network theory, Border

**Paper type** Research paper

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We would like to thank Torsten and Wanja Söderberg Foundation for Design Management for their financial support, the Swedish Literature Society in Finland for the project “Unpacking the contention between openness and security in the Nordic Region: Digital public surveillance Practises at three Nordic borders” (grant nr. 6080) within the Research Program “Future Challenges in the Nordics” and the Horizon Europe funding for the H22 Hephaestus project - Grant Agreement nr. 101095123.



Qualitative Research in  
Organizations and Management:  
An International Journal  
Vol. 19 No. 5, 2024  
pp. 35-53  
Emerald Publishing Limited  
1746-5648

DOI 10.1108/QROM-06-2024-2757

## Introduction

We respond to the call for papers for this special issue by reassembling tales from our fieldwork and reflecting on how Bruno Latour's work has inspired and shaped our own "Latour's way" to research not only out in the field but also between fields, countries and universities by forming our collaboration. Parachuting ourselves into non-modern magmas of organizing and disorganizing inside and outside organizations (Czarniawska, 2013; Czarniawska *et al.*, 2023), "we have [indeed] never been [felt] modern" (Latour, 1993) and carrying Latour in our hands has opened up novel opportunities for unexpected findings.

With Latour – "an accidental organization theorist" (Czarniawska, 2014b) – in our hands and his early translators in organization studies in our pockets (e.g. Czarniawska and Joerges, 1996; Joerges and Czarniawska, 1998; Czarniawska and Hernes, 2005; Alcadipani and Hassard, 2010), we have gone out in the field to explore the world of organizations and found that actions of organizing made us feel that, as Czarniawska (2013) puts it, an organization as constructed by traditional organization theory is like a golem turning against its creators. Our field journeys made us look at organizations as things whose boundaries result from work and can create conflicts (Cyert and March, 1963), can change over time and may not be straightforward to draw (Langley *et al.*, 2023). So, leaving the reified organization aside, out in the field we have tried to be *objective* (Latour, 2005a), that is to say, we have directed our attention towards objects, which sometimes have become "things," by means of the principle of symmetry, agnosticism and free association (Callon, 1986).

The Latourian *objectivity* that has guided us through different fields has not only pushed us to focus on objects of different kinds but has also been a *negative* guide as a method to write about organizing and organization rather than a positive model about organization (Latour, 2005a, 2012b). At first accidental perhaps (Czarniawska, 2014b) and then more explicit in framing organizing as one mode of existence (Latour, 2011b) – Latour's way in organization research inspires researchers toward *negative objectivity*, as fieldworkers following objects and navigating the mud of actions rather than fully ruling where, what and how we would see organizations. Such an approach articulates a world of ontological pluralism – a multiverse (Latour, 2011a; James, 1976) – where differences are not reduced but accounted for in both practise and theory and where organizations might at the same time be "solid, weighty, obdurate, obstinate, as a hundred ton pyramid that sits on our weak shoulders paralyzing and stifling us" and at risk that "it could dissipate like a flock of sparrows – we have to work hard to bring it together" (Latour, 2011b, p. 4).

Thus, with Latour in our hands, in this article, we narrate our excursions in three different fields, performing a *thing-guided ethnography of organizing*, which has taken shape as a translation of Latour's ideas in the study of organizing through the significant work of Czarniawska (with Joerges and Czarniawska, 1998; Czarniawska and Hernes, 2005, 2020) and Alcadipani and Hassard (2010). Latour has, thus, primarily guided us in fieldwork with three main moves of attention. First, we have directed our attention to follow objects not only in their stability but also in their mobility (Czarniawska, 2007) and "attachment" to different worlds (Latour, 1990) and in turn in their inscriptions of these worlds (Czarniawska, 2008; Joerges and Czarniawska, 1998; Latour and Woolgar, 1979). Second, we have turned to view the world and its things as becoming rather than being (Latour *et al.*, 2011) and to nets of actions (Czarniawska, 2004) rather than to actors with fixed identities. The third move of our attention is an appreciation for plurality and relationality, beyond the pure dualities of modernism (Latour, 2012b). Building on Souriau [1] (1943, in Latour, 2011c) and James (1976), Latour (2011c) made the very modes of existence plural and becoming, thus pointing at the historical character of ontology itself.

The excursions in this paper are particularly indebted to three of Latour's works: *Aramis, or the Love of Technology*; *Paris the Invisible City*; and *Making Things Public* (Latour, 1996; Latour and Hermant, 2009; Latour and Weibel, 2005). Without being explicitly focused on

organizing or organizations, all three of these works are important guides for our excursions as they offer journeys from objects to things in a plural organizational world and, as guides, they are also inspirational for the ways in which they have been composed both in textual and visual language. Our excursions into things – symmetric, negative and objective – have opened our sensitivity towards the politics and aesthetics of organizing, being things made both by matter and by debates over possible truths, as well as toward the aesthetics of the politics of things that organize and are organized. We have followed how the concern has turned “suppositions into facts” and how politics has turned “facts into concerns – or delegate[d] them into oblivion” (Czarniawska, 2006, p. 1554). We found that aesthetics has turned concerns into things (in common), being thus intimately related to the politics of organizing things.

The next two sections of this article follow our own journeys of *thing-guided symmetric anthropology* into studying the “organizing politics of organizing” and the “aesthetic matter of things.” We conclude with a discussion about how we have taken stock and moved forward with three practical lessons.

### Politics of organizing things: indebted to Aramis

*Aramis, or The Love of Technology* (Latour, 1996), the story of the birth and death of Aramis, the automated train system designed for Paris and “buried without fanfare” in 1987 (Latour, 1996, p. 3), was inspirational reading for understanding the process of associations among actants constructing an actor–network around an idea, a project and its development, but also failing to construct such an actor and thus witnessing the disappearance of projects that are technically brilliant but that do not enrol and mobilize decision makers. The book has also inspired us for its literary form, as it is written in a genre-crossing form between a scholarly text and a detective story. Although we have not dared to replicate the detective journey of Latour as a writer of *Aramis*, we have felt encouraged by his exposing the positions and the journey of the detective/sociologist/ethnographer in searching around rather than simply presenting the results as given. In other words, we have read *Aramis* as apprentices in the master’s workshop, learning the making of social science not only by reading the results but also through reading the writing for the way it is written. As Latour (2005a) tells the organization studies doctoral student from the London School of Economics with whom he has a fictive dialogue in the Interlude at the end of Part I of *Reassembling the Social*, our research journeys are “displacements” that make us able to “travel from one frame of reference to the next, from one standpoint to the next” (p. 146).

Traditional sociological methods start by defining actors. *Aramis* taught us that actors are a result of their actions: if they do not make a difference or do not act, they are not actors (Latour, 2005a). The idea that from an ontological perspective humans and non-humans are not different, derives from Bloor’s principle of symmetry (Bloor, 1991) and within ANT it is further elaborated. Since ANT is focusing on actants and their relationships, the researcher does not ask the question “What is it?”, but rather “How is it happening?” and “How is this constructed?”. Because the question is posed in this way, ontological questions are suspended and the world becomes flat. There is no pre-ordered structure, nor is there harmony, composition, integration or system. How something holds together is determined in the field, as actors are constantly battling over power, resources and attention (Latour, 1988a, 1996), a series of negotiations are brought into being and actors find Allies that recognize them as real and adjust their trajectories to adapt to them (Latour et al., 2011). As social scientists of a flat world, the advice – or rather the imperative, if we attain the intensity with which Latour gave it (Latour, 2005a) – is to leave frameworks behind and write descriptions without changing the register between technical and human aspects and actants. Since networks are fragile, this leads to the conclusion that everything is in a state of continuum eventuality of perishing, as happened to Aramis.

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We would like to expand on our debt to *Aramis* with two excursions from our research work: the first one is Marta's study of the "Egg" chair and the second one is Elena's study of the Swedish–Danish national border. These two excursions share a common inspiration from *Aramis* inasmuch as they embrace the displacement of the researcher as a way of exploration: The first excursion focuses on the displacement in time (in the past) and the second one takes displacement in space as its mode of inquiry.

Excursion in the design of a chair: Marta following the object in time [elaborated from Marta's field diary].

Note to the reader: In this section, the "I" is Marta's voice.

This study departed from and ended up challenging the idea of researching the traditional notion of an organization. Being part of a PhD in a business school, I, Marta, was expected to conduct a case study of an organization. The chosen organization was Fritz Hansen, a Danish furniture design company, and the focus was investigating how their designs became iconic and had such a long product life cycle. In this study, the three moves of our attention helped guide the empirical material. In the first move, it became helpful to resolve a "panic" mode: the lack of archives. As I wanted to reconstruct the product life cycle and the design process, I was expecting easily accessible data on their most iconic designs. However, since the first meetings, it became clear that it would be very challenging to reconstruct the history of the chairs from the archives since they were messy, disorganized or destroyed (the IT system was changed in early 2000 and the data before that period was deleted by mistake). However, organization memories were kept through non-catalogued newspaper articles and history books at the Danish Design Museum.

Following the actors in their network construction brought me to various museums in Denmark, London and an Oxford College, researching the traces that they left and how they were inscribed: in prototypes, documents and drawings. This reliance on artefacts, inscriptions and documents allowed Fritz Hansen to rely on them to narrate its practises, identities and history across space and time. This approach allowed displacing and changing standpoints in research beyond subjectivism; however, the primary actors that were followed were the chairs, their materials, Arne Jacobsen (designer) and Søren Hansen (manager of Fritz Hansen).

Fritz Hansen specializes in chairs, tables and sofas, with a history dating back to the end of the 19th century. It is well known as a manufacturer of iconic Danish designs, including the work of Jacobsen and Kjærholm. The headquarters are in Allerød, a small town on the outskirts of Copenhagen, where the company moved early in its history in order to expand the factory and to be closer to wood supplies. Much of the old factory space is now transformed into office space, along with the organization's small design museum, a warehouse where articles from national and international newspapers and magazines, collected since the foundation of the company, are displayed in stalls under glass screens to give visitors a sense of Fritz Hansen's long history. I soon realized that the invocation of the past in a sort of selected and deliberate memory was more important than actual historical and geographical continuity. In other words, a simple visit to the museum, aimed at giving the visitor the simple facts and dates about Fritz Hansen as a company, opened up my interest in the politics involved in organizing memory and also in the way the constructed past itself acted upon present organizing processes in the company.

Moved by the interest in the politics of organizing memory, I searched for an archive as the place in which I could find visible traces of this political effort. Although Fritz Hansen seemed to work with the past deliberately, its company archive consists of an apparently randomly collated set of records and objects. Whilst there are a few people working for the organization who seem remarkably knowledgeable of the company's history, their stories are not brought

together in any concerted fashion that I would perhaps have expected of a corporate archive of a company with a corporate museum. As archives and museums are usually used as the main starting point for investigating the past in an organizational setting (Brown *et al.*, 2001), I did not know where to go, stuck in the field surprised by the fragmentation of traces I could not anticipate. Here Latour's approach to the discovery of Aramis inspired methodologically how to overcome the absence of ordered material and memories in the archive: "follow the actors in their network construction" (Latour, 1987), across time and space or in their action nets (Czarniawska, 2004). In my case, I followed the fragmented traces I could find in any corner of the company building where the past of Fritz Hansen seemed to materialize in stories of those remembering.

So, I threw myself into the company mud in and out of the walls of the archive and the museum. For two months, I was at the company every day, hanging around, looking for stories and following their traces from one to the other. Formal and informal ad-hoc interviews were conducted with on-site observations. Being at the company meant physically going to the building that was hosting the offices of the company employees, the archive and the museum. I was performing a case study within its boundaries: an address, a building, a badge and sometimes even a desk. But I soon became flooded with pieces of material that wanted to draw me outside the walls and go with the flow of our move of following traces wherever they took me. I started to follow them beyond the building and that took me to the radio, the Danish Television, the Design Museum in Copenhagen, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and St Catherine's College in Oxford.

Returning from the field to my desk (Czarniawska, 2014c), I ordered the material and labelled each piece of material in a database, which subsequently consisted of 65 images from public museums and 563 records, 1,219 images from the collection in the company museum, and 246 descriptions concerning different internal documents, including reports, letters, minutes, financial documents, financial statements, press releases and clips from newspapers, magazines and presentations. For each record, details on the source, content and other signifiers were noted in the database. Danish, Norwegian, French, Spanish and Italian documents were translated into English.

In line with the idea of a flat world, descriptions here have been important, like the lab for natural scientists because they present facts not "*simply as a matter of facts but always as matters of concern, with their mode of fabrication and their stabilizing mechanisms clearly visible*" (Latour, 2005b, p. 120). With all the material I had brought to my desk (on my computer), I needed boundaries and describing and narrating helped me draw the boundaries between the researcher and the field. It is an analytical as well as a practical undertaking of decoding (describing) facts that are made matters of concern through politics-in-action (Latour, 1987). Therefore, the narration was more than an explanation, but its vocabulary cannot be universal or generalized. Each researcher has to choose his way of describing because it is not possible to delineate a universal method of description: "Having opted in this text for a vocabulary of translation we know that our narrative is no more, but no less valid, than any other" (Callon, 1986, p. 4).

Through descriptions, an object popped up in my making of Fritz Hansen's memory. Amidst unmodern props of organizational knowing, such as gossips, unfinished chairs and disorganized papers in the archive, the office and the museum, I encountered the "Egg" Chair, a lounge chair manufactured by Fritz Hansen, introduced at the "Salon Des Arts Ménagers" in Paris in 1959. The chair is made from foam flakes, covered by fabric and sustained by an aluminum foot. So, going with the flow, I followed the chair as an object (Latour, 2005a; Czarniawska, 2007) and tried to read about it wherever it had been spoken about. Figure 1 shows my attempts to get lost in the thickness of the chair and its history and reduce the description into a set of lines representing relations among surviving actors.



Figure 1.  
Following the  
Egg Chair

Source(s): Authors' work

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Inspired by Latour's book *Aramis*, the act of following the narrative thread of the fuzzy front end, idea generation, product development and life cycle of the chair entails more than mere chronological engagement; it necessitates a displacement in both time and space to follow the actors in their network construction. The intricacies of *Aramis*, understanding the design process, engagement in the choice of materials, construction of the experiments and finding buyers, have meant not only journeying through the historical unfolding of events but also traversing the spatial dimensions of the project's development. As Latour's narrative invites readers to transcend the limitations of linear time, allowing them to witness the unfolding of *Aramis* during its conception, planning and execution, so in the construction of the Danish design chairs, as a researcher, I was transported across the physical landscapes where the chairs took shape, from the drawing boards to prototyping, from meetings at Fritz Hansen to meeting with the SAS airlines to construct the hotel; from Denmark to St Catherine's College in Oxford. Since the chairs were radical innovations, following the *Aramis* approach allowed me to show the complex interplay between human creativity and the environments in which it operates. By integrating Latour's theoretical framework, I aimed at (re)constructing a comprehensive understanding of how historical context, design philosophy and materiality intersect to shape the development and perception of design chairs. I learnt that following an object, its fragmented traces and stories could bring me to explore both the past and its politics (through the organizing of memory) at the same time.

Excursion on national borders and their surveillance: Elena searching for a quasi-object in space [elaborated from Elena's field diary].

Note to the reader: In this section, the "I" is Elena's voice.

Inspired by *Aramis* and the search for technology, the dreams of it and the work around it, I, Elena, became interested in the walking around – physical displacement – of Latour as a researcher in his attempt to follow traces of *Aramis* the transport system and in his encounters with dreams, designs, critiques and other works of this technology. As an organizational scholar, I was fascinated by how a thing – *Aramis* – brought Latour to different places, offices, organizations and allowed him to follow traces of actions without the constraints of organizational boundaries that often constrain management and organization scholars. In earlier projects, I had departed from a single organization, its headquarters and its official interlocutors (Raviola, 2022) and following traces of actions helped me to describe how technology carries and transforms the institution of news. However, I realized that taking organizational boundaries as given, limited my cuts of relevance and my displacements. So, I decided to attempt a methodological shift and to focus on a thing – a matter of concern – as my point of departure.

National borders caught my attention as a contested, but at the same assembling, thing that is visible on a map (e.g. a Google map), is an object of work and a centre of dreams (Johnson *et al.*, 2011). They are physical territorial matters – on waters, islands, mountains and in the air – and at the same time they are made symbolically as conventions. Borders are also currently the site of implementation of new technologies that might reshape them (Amoore *et al.*, 2008). Thus, in 2022, I set out to study together with other Nordic scholars the so-called digital Nordic borders ([www.dinobord.eu](http://www.dinobord.eu)) and in particular how digital surveillance is practised at the borders, usually as a way to make them both seamless (for many) and harder (for a few) at the same time (Kuster and Tsianos, 2016). Given the physical extension of borders, we set up a group of about 10 researchers that could go to the field and search for surveillance practises at the borders. We began by searching the internet for traces of such practises at the intersection between three sets of keywords: intelligent algorithms/digital technologies, surveillance/control/openness and national borders. The field is complex technologically, institutionally and is publicly debated.



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We started from the traces of actions we knew of. We knew that the EU had issued a directive about the implementation of a system of biometric control at the Schengen outer border called the Entry/Exit System (EES); we knew that the Nordic Council of Ministers had declared and written a strategy for the Nordics to become the most integrated region in the world; we knew that everyone in the project had a biometric passport; and we knew that the police and customs authorities were involved by mandate in border controls. We had also all been travelling EU citizens and workers – Nordic and Southern European – and had crossed the borders many times.

Our thing – the borders – made us search for it in a myriad of texts. We had dived into the digital archive of the internet, mediated by Google search, that could help us find where (in which texts) borders, technology and surveillance intersected. Following our first move of attention to the traces of actions of all actants, we went virtually out in the field (Czarniawska, 2014c) and were flooded with links, pictures and documents. Latour’s analysis of the actions, narratives, antinarratives and alliances around the European hotel management, the tourists and the key (Latour, 1990) has in its simplicity helped us to understand how inanimate objects can act in a network. In our observations in the field, we have encountered many objects held somewhat together in our thing: “borders,” whose “attachment” to different principles or norms is contested and which could at one time make a given social arrangement stable, whilst at another time broken by these same arrangements. Through Czarniawska’s early translation of ANT in organization studies (Joerges and Czarniawska, 1998; Czarniawska and Sévon, 2005), we have moved our attention to follow objects not only in their stability but also in their mobility and activity in their “attachment” to different worlds.

Although we all agreed on following the objects and starting from tracing actions, we got directly into trouble when we started thinking what this meant concretely. We knew the crossroads by name, but where would we start? Latour pointed out the irrelevance of this question and recommended to start anywhere; in the field, like Latour in his study of the Pasteurization of France (Latour, 1988b), we find “stories that define for us who are the main actors, what happens to them, what trials they undergo” (Latour, 1988b, p. 9). Some of us started googling the technologies that we expected to find at the borders and some of us started searching for documents from different organizations. Searching for organizations that we expected to be actors at the borders was both a praise to *Aramis* and a betrayal. It was praise to *Aramis* and Latour’s anthropology (1996) because the choice of these actors came from previous research by some of us in the nearby phenomena and from our experience of crossing borders. It felt like a betrayal because it let us enter the field from the institutionalized actors’ perspective whose role was already black-boxed and given.

After some months of desktop research and orientation, with the frustration of being in a dense jungle of documents – intricate and interconnected – we moved out into the field and visited borders where we expected to find them. My task was to go to the Øresund bridge that crosses the Swedish–Danish border, as appeared on the geographical map. The border can only be crossed by car or train passing along the bridge. This implies also that no control happens at the actual borderline as drawn on the map, but it can happen either on the Swedish side or on the Danish side of the bridge. So, my first stop was on the Swedish side of the bridge, at its beginning, and I describe my first encounters in Figures 2 and 3.

This short attempt to narrate my excursion at the border in my undergoing investigation of digital surveillance practises at the borders is an attempt at a reversed *Aramis* in a way, whereby visiting the same place through different hosts rather than following an actor/object in different places I saw both the same thing and different things. Also in a way, this excursion for me took *Aramis* to the edge of mobile fieldwork and exposed the symmetry between things and people, technology and workers, non-humans and humans in new ways. Over months, my reverse *Aramis* journey made evident that borders – the ontology of “borders” as a thing – are transforming despite remaining drawn on the map in the same



Source(s): Authors' work

Figure 2.  
Getting to the border

place: From the different places I observed the borders at different times, I saw “the making exist” borders (Latour, 2011c), continuously failing to separate two territories and yet being maintained. My spatial displacement around the same thing threw me from the detective story of Aramis to the sociological opera of the invisible city of Paris (Latour and Hermant, 2009).

Latour and Hermant (2009, p. 1) aim their sociological opera to “wander through the city, in texts and images, exploring some of the reasons why it cannot be captured at a glance” and to explore the usually hidden work of “engineers, technicians, civil servants, inhabitants, and shopkeepers” in making the city visible and “Parisians’ lives possible”, and I found myself exploring the borders in a similar way. Only the border at the Øresund bridge has emerged as an unwalkable line, a technologically dense (to most invisibly so) zone and also an emergent category that escapes geographical limits. Shifting the host to visit the border showed me the multiplicity of borders and made evident the different aesthetic experiences of the borders. Most of all, the short walks in the spaces closest to the border – be they near the police buildings, the border control plastic shelters or the Traffic Central office – made clear the multiple representations of the borders and the intricate and intimate relation between technological sensors and human sensing.

The bridge showed me its actor-hood in full force as a “worknet” (Latour, 2005b, p. 131) of concrete, steel, cameras, workers, travellers, cars, Brobizz (the small machine making automatic payment possible), ANPR technology (automated number plate recognition), credit card machines, etc. Not only were the actants heterogeneous (Law, 2002), but they also knotted actions together thus making the bridge and, in a sense, this small piece of border, where the political system of national borders physically overlaps with the commercial jurisdiction of a corporation managing the bridge. This overlapping produces the qualification of people passing over the bridge as customers (of the Consortium) through



Source(s): Authors' work

Figure 3.  
Displacements along  
the border

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the payment stations, the credit card machines, the ANPR cameras, etc. and as citizens through the police shelters, the police mobile app scanning passports, the passport, other ANPR cameras, etc.

Taking Latour to the border between Sweden and Denmark was not without friction, mistakes and inconsistencies. Out in the field, without pre-theorizing about borders, surveillance or digital technologies, the companionship of ANT modified the goals I had in mind while writing the research application with a given framework on digital surveillance at Nordic borders. We sketched a world of hyperrational surveillance through digital means of control and we found a patchy world of intuition, stories, laws-in-action, some cameras and many mobile phones, with a lot of holes and voids, which make us question the opposition between openness and security, analogue and digital, law-enforcement and service. Although Latour's way of describing border might upset critical migration scholars, who are engaged in discriminatory practices of sorting out people at the borders, this process has given thickness to our thing – the border – and has opened, for us, a space of vulnerability in performing the fieldwork that naively took away the over-structure of sensitivity that had captured me while getting lost in the dense jungle of documents found in our initial phase of desk research.

Through the readings of Latour, we have learned the intricate relationships between humans, objects and phenomena in shaping the world. For our third study, we reflected on his work on *Reset Modernity!* (Latour and Leclercq, 2016), recognizing a fascinating mode of engagement with the art world and artists as a mode of inquiry. In contemporary artistic practises, the boundaries between artistic and philosophical methods blur, working with artists to rethink the world, its structures and their interrelations. Similarly, we have taken this approach to understand public-engaged art that was created in the small Swedish town of Linnarhult.

### **The aesthetic mattering of things: indebted to *Paris* and *Making Things Public***

Thickening things in a Latourian way has for us not only implied attention to the politics of organizing things and encouraged us outside and across organizational boundaries, but also moved our attention to the very “matters of things,” which has, in turn, left us with their aesthetics. Extending the process that Czarniawska (2006) delineated in her review of Latour (2005b), “concern can turn suppositions into facts and politics can turn facts into concerns — or delegate them into oblivion” and aesthetics can turn concerns into things: the intertwining of politics and aesthetics makes facts and objects into things that organize and are organized.

In a common writing project, where we investigated how publicness is organized in space and place, we have had two of Latour's works in our hands: *Paris: the Invisible City* (Latour and Hermant, 2009) and *Making Things Public* (Latour and Weibel, 2005). Adding to the three movements in the previous contexts, in this case, we also mobilize the understanding of the *res publica* (State) – the role of public spaces in the construction of society and nature in a Swedish town. Despite the central role of public space, as critics have lamented, liberal democracies' shrinking state has also affected the presence and organization of public space in our urban and rural landscapes, which is observed at the encounter of participating in a public space and reflecting on the aesthetic role of the park. So, our third excursion is to Linnarhult, a recreational area at the periphery of Gothenburg, where we followed the actors in the process of making a public space.

In this third fieldwork, the notion of panopticon, grounding the idea of the invisible city in *Paris: the Invisible City* (Latour and Hermant, 2009), has been guiding for us to experience hidden assemblages of urban existence. Rather than a single, all-seeing eye, the oligoptica comprises various viewpoints – multiple gazes that shape our understanding of the urban space. Latour's inquiry reveals the intricate web of techniques that sustain Paris. From water services to police headquarters, these “oligoptica” do not see the city in its entirety, but

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navigate it through ordinary objects, such as streets and infrastructures. As Italo Calvino's "invisible cities" transcend physicality, Paris, too, becomes a space where the real and the virtual converge, reimagining social fabric through multifaceted lenses. Pursuing the idea of organizing outside organizations (Czarniawska *et al.*, 2023) and fascinated by a city as an ensemble of multiple oligoptica which allows the view of many partial and fragmented organizing processes (Latour and Hermant, 2009; Latour, 2012a), we combine the idea of oligopticon with an interest in public space and the organizing of publicness, where Latour and Weibel's (2005) *Making Things Public* became important. Through these lenses, we researched how artistic processes could mobilize the oligoptica of human and non-human citizens of this Swedish town, gazing and creating a public space.

In the ambitious exhibition and book *Making Things Public* (Latour and Weibel, 2005), Latour opens the oeuvre by reflecting on the public things with reference to the Icelandic Althing. He offers a detailed description of the materiality of the Althing and of how this is central to making issues a matter of concern in an object-oriented democracy, as he phrases:

It's clear that each object – each issue – generates a different pattern of emotions and disruptions, of disagreements and agreements. There might be no continuity, no coherence in our opinions, but there is a hidden continuity and a hidden coherence in what we are attached to. Each object gathers around itself a different assembly of relevant parties. Each object triggers new occasions to passionately differ and dispute. Each object may also offer new ways of achieving closure without having to agree on much else. In other words, objects – taken as so many issues – bind all of us in ways that map out a public space profoundly different from what is usually recognized under the label of "the political". It is this space, this hidden geography that we wish to explore through this catalog and exhibition. (Latour and Weibel, 2005, p. 5)

As Latour (2007) frames it, we wanted to investigate what thinging – the process of making "thick things with a material definition of matter" (p. 140) – might mean for making space public, and this has brought us to understanding and analysing aesthetic processes in this making. In a public space at the periphery of Gothenburg, Sweden, a recreational green area, we explored the multiple possibilities of designing spaces for play in the experience of the city beyond bounded playgrounds. A series of design and craft interventions were organized during 2021 and 2022 in order to transform Linnarhult for public play through aesthetic experiences. This research has been different; as it was here we met in writing: Elena conducting the fieldwork together with a colleague (see Raviola *et al.*, 2023), and Marta commenting on the analytical process.

Excursion – The aesthetic mattering of things – A recreational area at the periphery of Gothenburg.

In 2021, our research project orchestrated a series of craft activities with local citizens, designers and craftspeople. The engagement with artistic practices to explore different aspects of Gaia was not stranger to Latour, who experimented on the connections between scientific representation and artwork in composing a common world and bridging the distance between phenomena of large scale, like the ocean of catastrophes around us and our tiny life of fish in that ocean (Latour, 2011d). The idea was to make things together with natural material that would grow over time and that would shape the space into different areas and uses. One line of those activities consisted of planting willows in ways that would shape the common space in different ways and would bring together the different voices of the community, organizing aesthetics. Aesthetics is intended as perception by the senses and suspended cognition trying to understand things in the world from their autopoietic processes, shaped by technologies and other materialities of seeing and making.

Willow was a material that many people found accessible and easy to use, even if lacking professional craftsmanship skills. As willow blooms early in the spring, it also provides food for the insects after their winter sleep, which is also connected to their local civic organization

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the Eco Agroforestry Center's (EAC's) idea to encourage human-nature-based activities. Willow is a common plant in Sweden, widely used to weave baskets and is mentioned in several children's songs.

We explored the construction of Linnarhult through thick things for materially framing and playing out the public space. These thick things were artefactual elements the community wanted to aesthetically work on and through which it constituted itself. In January 2021 the EAC, to which the municipality assigned the care of the area, invited two architects from a local landscape architectural firm and a professional craftmaker to design the work with willow. When EAC members met the specialists of landscape and willow, they wanted to discuss which function the willow as a new plant could have in Linnarhult: while standing on-site on a cold January day, the crowd moved to different spots on the land and imagined what willow would do in that spot. As the area is very large and most of it is an open space, it is very exposed to wind, rain and other weather. In the meeting, willow was discussed as a light and organic material that could provide some protection from the wind and also introduce some separated rooms in the large space.

The willow, the landscape architects, and the community of Linnarhult formed themselves in relation to each other like the smell kit, the perfume teacher and the perfume nose described by Latour (2004) in his article on how to talk about the body. Learning from the willow spokesperson (the landscape architects), from tools representing and visualizing what willow will look like (maps and drawings) and from willow plants, people at Linnarhult started to see willow where they did not notice before, to know the plant and to project the effects of the plant on the recreational area. As Latour wrote about the perfume nose: "Before the (training) session, odors rained on the pupils without making them act, without making them speak, without rendering them attentive, without arousing them in precise ways: any group of odors would have produced the same general undifferentiated effect or affect on the pupil" (Latour, 2004, p. 207). Just like any plant would have produced the same effect on people at Linnarhult, but after working with experts and willow an intentional Linnarhult community was formed where willow was a constitutive element of both Linnarhult as a space and its community. The willow opened new possibilities to shape the space, in particular through a play hut, external fences and a larger willow shelter protecting from the weather.

Thus, it was planted and during the Spring it grew and greened. Before the summer, the willow was ready to be used as a craft material and some training workshops were organized to learn willow weaving in June 2021, through which the willow community became also a craft community involved not only in aesthetic processes of making a plant grow but also of making things with natural material. It helps understand how a public space is perceived by senses, what encounters are enacted, and how complex interactions and connections in the public spaces are revealed.

When the actual workshop started, the craftmaker gave some brief instructions, and then the participants immediately began weaving and constructing. They started by weaving a fence and then built a tunnel at the entrance. There were also some smaller tryouts with constructing huts. This is a *mise en scène* (staging), a complex play of operations that bring together the basic components of the willow, the public space as an organization, the volunteers and the researchers. The public space represents a heterogeneous field that is at the same time "inert" and, because of the different historicities, interests and actions, it could be potentially "disordered". The *mise en scène* holds this space, translating the inert discourses, aesthetics, interests of different actors and technologies onto a construction. The design and the translation into shape represent transformation of heterogeneous interests into an elementary unit of the hut.

In this process of planting willow in certain positions, making it grow and harvesting it for craftmaking, both a space and a community were constituted aesthetically as they were materially made to exist (Latour, 2011c). To return to the perfume nose, Latour wrote: "Thus

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body parts are progressively acquired at the same time as ‘world counter-parts’ are being registered in a new way. Acquiring a body is thus a progressive enterprise that produces at once a sensory medium and a sensitive world” (Latour, 2004, p. 207).

Rather than relying on the essentialist understanding of aesthetics, often related also to the belief that by their very nature artworks will infuse the world with better values and will change for example business education, we have thus approached aesthetics in action by looking at the relation between humans and non-humans, bodies together and plants/craft materials in the becoming of a given place.

### **Taking stock and moving forward: crafting struggles in the multiverse**

In our excursions to explore the “Egg,” the Øresund bridge and Linnarhult, we have had different versions of Latour in our hands and used his writing not as a thin object, but as a thick thing which we could verse in multiple ways to get guidance, inspiration and also relief from our daily fieldwork failures. Although it has puzzled us at times both in the field and in academic settings, such as conferences, application writings and reviews, our own Latour’s way of doing organization research has been full of what we could call “Latour moments,” that is to say moments in which we got impasse, embarrassed, felt naked and changed the questions we asked. When Marta did not find the archive she expected despite the repeated solicitation of memories by Fritz Hansen as an organization, she realized that the archive and the archiving itself was a process to follow. When Elena went to the Swedish–Danish border on the Øresund bridge, she felt overwhelmed by the openness and plainness of the employees both at the consortium and at the police. Having thought about a hyper-surveillant assemblage before getting to the bridge and imagining secrecy as a way of living at the border, she felt exposed by the plain descriptions of the workers she met and followed them in their concerns. This shift in questions and attention transformed us as researchers and our interlocutors together not to introduce a distance between the researchers and the researched, but rather a distance between the before and after the research, to quote Latour and Weibel (2005):

The distance to be researched is not that between the observer and the observed – this would be cheap exoticism – but that between the contents of the world before and after the inquiry. So neither distance nor empathy is a sure guide that a good science has been concocted, but only this criterion: is there now a distance between the new repertoire of actions and the repertoire with which we started? If yes, the time has not been wasted; if no, then money has been spent in vain, no matter how ‘scientific’, in the traditional sense, the results look (p. 218).

We think about the travelling of this distance as a *translation*, in Latour’s words: “like Michel Serres, I use *translation* to mean displacement, drift, invention, mediation, the creation of a link that didn’t exist before, [that] . . . modifies two elements or agents” (Latour, 1994, p. 31).

We have approached fieldwork as displacing ourselves across this distance – making it and running it – with Latourian tools we take with us. In particular, we want to highlight here three of them that we have used and learned in the field: leaving *a priori* categories and questioning those we see; placing our research viewing somewhere, moving and staying in different view places, always aware that what we see from are oligopticon rather than an omnicomprehensive panopticon; thick thinging the field rather than thin objectifying, that is to say trying to stay with things in the field and understand how they are made, act and what they mean.

Initially, when we jumped to the field ready to study organizations, we encountered a lot of categories – some of them we had brought with us, such as humans and non-humans, members and non-members, inside and outside organizations. We used these categories, but also bumped into them as obstacles, like in the case of the chair or the borders. In the words of Harris (2005, p. 174), the “significance in the present context resides in [Latour’s work] the

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exposure of interplay between human organizations and the organization of nonhumans or matter, and its demonstration that this reciprocity is neither modern nor confined to the techno-scientific.”

So, we started moving and displacing ourselves, thus shaping our oligopticon and experimenting with it in writing, as here. Travelling the distance of our own translation, we found ourselves breaking the rules of case studies and the theory of organizations and trying to follow chains of associations made by social and technical relations: “Instead we are always faced with chains which look like this H-NH-H-NH-H-NH” (Latour, 1991, p. 110) and we have never encountered pure humans or artefacts, but rather always brewed impure hybrids (Latour, 1993). Our travelling in time and space, also exhorted by Czarniawska and Sevón (2005), has thus made clear to us not only that our research work is impossibly all-encompassing, but that the ordering and organizing processes that we follow and that might make up organizations, exist as a *moiré* of organizational narratives or procedures “recursively told, embodied, and performed in a series of different materials” (Law, 1994, p. 259).

These moves led us to the third learning process, which is what we would call “thick thinging,” with reference to Latour’s notion of things as concerned matters (Latour, 1993) and thinging as the process by which things become things (Latour, 2007). Thick things are dense and often difficult to see through, as the matters we have set out to research. Thick thinging is thus for us an exhortation to keep the approach of ANT, allow for lengthy descriptions and restrain from simplistic explanations. Through thickness, in our excursion we got lost and trapped in the field – in the archives, in the border legislations, among the concerns of Linnarhult – but we have also realized that facts are not only made concerns through politics but also things through aesthetics. We have discovered that the thickness of things is not immobile, but rather fluid inasmuch as “the human or social and the technical or material” co-evolve and “properties are exchanged between these differing actants, such that ‘whenever we learn something about the management of humans, we shift that knowledge to nonhumans and endow them with more and more organizational properties’ while in turn ‘what has been learned from nonhumans is reimported so as to reconfigure people’ (Latour, 1999b, pp. 207-208, emphasis in original)” (Harris, 2005, p. 174).

In this paper, we have also hinted at the notion of the aesthetics of politics, which we invite scholars to further develop. In particular, to research the entanglement between the aesthetics and politics of organizing in research through the use of art in research processes. Latour’s early programme SPEAP (Sciences Po Experimentation in Arts and Politics) intertwined aesthetics, research and politics, arguing that art and research are not separate realms but rather co-constitutive ways of knowing. In the SPEAP programme, Latour invited researchers to challenge the conventional boundaries of disciplines, bringing artists and researchers together to explore collaborations through conversations and co-creation practises. Through this interdisciplinary lens, aesthetics cease to be mere adornments and become, instead, a critical process for understanding and transforming our world. Latour’s vision extends beyond the ivory tower, urging us, as researchers, to engage with the messiness of reality. In this experimental space, artists and researchers together grapple with questions of power, representation and agency. In the aesthetics of politics of organizing we call for, art becomes a site of inquiry, a laboratory where the materiality of ideas is explored, by taking shape and mutating and where the artistic practises, the researcher’s field notes and the public’s gaze converge and collide, generating new possibilities of understanding a reality that is not objective but becomes necessarily political.

Hence, we invite researchers, in their future efforts, to embrace aesthetics in research, as research processes are not a sterile endeavour but a vibrant, messy affair, where art and politics can intersect, sparking conversations, unsettling assumptions, reimagining our world, wrapping and wafting the collective fabric, weaving together the threads of knowledge, expression, interventions and research impact.



Note

1. Étienne Souriau was re-read by Bruno Latour in relation to his works on the modes of existence, and significantly influenced his thinking. In relation to the development of our reasoning later in the paper, it is here noteworthy to highlight that Souriau held a chair in aesthetics and Latour explicitly recognized a parallel between Souriau's interest in "the doing of making, the making exist" of art and Latour's own fascination for the laboratory (Latour, 2011c, p. 313).

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