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“In occupied Paris, a Gestapo officer who had barged his way into Picasso’s apartment pointed at a photo of the mural, Guernica, asking: ‘Did you do that?’ ‘No’, Picasso replied, ‘you did’ (The Guardian, 26/3/09)

1. Introduction

In the call for this special issue, we asked: how do the arts, artists and artistic work leverage paradoxes to attract popular attention while also going against the grain of prevailing opinion? How might such work critically reflect on the status quo’s embedded power and uncover new expressive possibilities? Paradox theory has emerged as a significant presence in management and organization studies and as a lens inspiring connection with other theories. Paradox refers to persistent and mutually constituting oppositions inherent to organizing (Smith and Lewis 2011, Clegg *et al.* 2002, Gaim *et al.* 2024) that translate into undecidable trade-offs (Berti and Cunha 2023). These contradictions may be generative or dysfunctional (Berti *et al.* 2021, Gaim, Clegg and Cunha 2021, Cunha, Rego, Berti *et al.* 2023) but can also be sources of novelty and synergy for organizations (Smith and Lewis 2022). Nevertheless, paradox is more than either a problem inviting resolution or a stepping-stone to innovation. Its etymological meaning (*para-doxa*, contrary to, or existing at the same time or in parallel with the prevailing opinion) points to its potential for challenging taken-for-granted views of the world, acting as a form of resistance (Luhmann 1995). Thus, paradox is a condition of life, not a problem to fix or a managerial tool to get from point A to point B.

In this special issue, we focus on how paradox theory illuminates the arts as both agents of critique and instruments of engagement. People in key positions in networks of power relations often confront others with absurdly paradoxical demands and situations, forming undecidable trade-off decisions (Gaim *et al.* 2021, Berti and Cunha 2023), especially when these others are relatively less advantageously positioned in established circuits of power (Clegg 2023, Berti and Simpson 2021, Cunha, Rego, Clegg *et al.* 2023, Gaim *et al.* 2022).

Artistic endeavors in multiple media can function not only as a celebration of power (Berger 1972, Golomstock 1990, Warnke 1993) but can also ‘provide an entry point to problematize existing taken-for-grantedness’ (Riaz 2023, p. 1224). Scoping our invitation in terms of the latter and critiquing the impulse to intellectualize or solve what is emotional and deeply human, we invited authors to submit their work on the arts, artists, power, paradox as a phenomenon and paradox work as a process, focusing on the heuristic potential of paradox as a way of revealing and challenging the status quo, through the many techniques of resistance, such as irony (Badham and Santiago 2023).

Previous work has explored the presence of tensions, contradictions and paradoxes in the creation and management of artistic organizations (Gaim 2018, Patrick 2018, Cunha *et al.* 2019), yet the deliberate use of diverse artistic media to leverage *paradox* in organizing practices that engage with and resist dominant structures is the central concern of this special issue. Assuming the various arts as premised on distinctive modes of organizing (Chandler 2020), these articles explore the paradoxical role of the arts in reconfiguring collective memory, questioning contemporary norms, and proposing alternative futures, even at the risk of being so marginalized as to be dismissed in their reception as artistically illegitimate – a reception often shaped by entrenched power. Historically major figures such as Caravaggio (see Robb 2000, also, Moss 2000) and Coltrane (Brown 2010) have played this role of reframing oeuvres and relations of power, raising questions as to whether art born in struggle, resistance, tyranny, disruption and war is necessarily bound to become mainstream and institutionalized – think of punk (Laing 1985, Savage 1991, Dunn 2016) or house music (Thornton 1995) as contemporary examples, of jazz (Jones 1963) and rock ‘n’ roll (Sztarmáy 1987, Altschuler 2003) in the 1920s and 1950s, or of artistic responses to the war in Ukraine as forms of testifying, documenting and protecting a culture (Dodds and Martynyuk 2022, Higgins 2022, Kot *et al.* 2024).

Attending to the subversive role of the arts also enables a reimagining of paradox theory itself. Doing so counters the tendency towards intellectualizing, whereby scholars distance themselves from discomfort by turning paradox into an abstract problem. Rather, paradoxical tensions often become embodied (Andriopoulos and Lewis 2010, Simpson and Berti 2020). Arts also prevent paradox theory from over-domestication and resisting any tendency to interpret the search for quick equilibrium ‘as protecting the dominant logic of order’ (Cunha and Putnam 2019, p. 100). It has been long recognized that arts can simultaneously serve the interests of the dominant classes by reproducing the status quo, while also bearing revolutionary potential by interrogating and disrupting inherited constraints (Bourdieu 1984, Horkheimer and Adorno 2012/1947).

Arts, in their contemporary communicative forms (e.g. pop culture), can also make societal inequalities rooted in deeply polarized issues visible – unsettling dominant binaries and creating space for generative ambiguity, critical reflection, and productive dialogues (Greco *et al.* 2025). Through such mechanisms of visibilization (Tuckermann 2019), arts can stage paradoxical outcomes, fostering inclusivity while addressing entrenched societal inequalities in systemic ways (Greco and Long 2022). The same applies to organizational paradoxes: they do not just appear fully formed as strategic ‘puzzles’ awaiting rational resolution, but rather emerge through struggles over meaning and competing value commitments (Fairhurst and Putnam 2023). These struggles often manifest as tensions between actors who privilege one pole of a contradiction over the other (Berti and Cunha 2023).

For instance, art must navigate the tension between engaging and challenging its audience; between provoking and promoting society. Artists also dwell in ambiguity, live inside the tensions they express, hold it, make it visible and invite others to feel it. By studying how artists use artistic tools (ideas, traditions, expectations) to intervene in communicative systems through subversion, we can reflect on how paradox may be mobilized both to preserve existing structures through adaptive innovation and to provoke dialectical transformation fueled by conflict (Hargrave and Van de Ven 2017).

While arts can be enlisted to preserve and reproduce hegemonic power structures (Gramsci 1971), power always invites resistance. There is, therefore, a rich lineage of artistic resistance: in literature, through Kafka, Borges or Hasek (Fleming and Sewell 2002), in the theatre, via playwrights such as Beckett and Ionesco (Wellwarth 1962, Breuer 1993), in protest songs (Guimarães-Costa *et al.* 2009, Friedman 2013, Esteve-Faubel *et al.* 2019), in political satire and irony (Brock 2018, Fischione 2020), in the poetry of migrant workers in contemporary China (Van Crevel 2019, Goodman 2021), and in the work of Banksy, whose status as insider-outsider exemplifies paradoxical engagement (Cunha *et al.* 2021). Art is inscribed not only in the material artefacts artists produce, elites display and dealers trade, but also in any imaginative work that confronts power. Such work requires the envisaging of alternative futures. To stifle imagination, flatten difference, and repeat orthodoxy endlessly is the preferred strategy of hegemony.

With this special issue, we seek to expand our knowledge of the role of the arts in rendering the ‘normal’ paradoxical, confronting doxa, and uncovering absurdities and open space for meaning. In doing so, the arts may both criticize and resist dominant ideologies, embracing inconsistency to reveal the contradictions embedded within the status quo, and sometimes exalting the powerful only to expose their absurdity (Rosen 1988). The intersection of paradox theory, power and the arts thus present a rich terrain for students of political power and its organization.

2. Overview of papers in this special issue

The special issue comprises four research articles, two essays, and a poetry review, collectively exploring how artistic expression engages paradox to reveal, inform, and critique social relationships, processes, and ideological contradictions (see [Table 1](#)).

Uffe Willemoes-Wissing explores a systems-based approach to understanding and navigating organizational paradoxes, drawing parallels with musical theory, specifically Schönberg’s dodecaphony. By leveraging the musical analogy of polyphony, where tensions are layered horizontally (across individuals) and vertically (across organizational levels), the author suggests analyzing paradoxes as a dynamic interplay of multiple poles rather than dualistic opposites. The framework allows for a nuanced understanding of how dissonance accumulates or resolves within systems, facilitating the identification of dominant salience patterns. In this perspective, paradox thinking can be likened to the trained ear of a musical connoisseur – attuned to dissonance, yet capable of recognizing underlying harmony. Achieving such connoisseurship involves deliberate practice and progressive conditioning, transforming tension into interdependence and enabling virtuous cycles of change. Ultimately, the article argues that such recognition of the interconnectedness of paradoxes can emancipate organizations and individuals from defensive responses, stimulating innovation, resilience, and systemic insight.

Jennifer Baraza discusses the intriguing case of Aaron Curme, an invisible artist. The author playfully and provocatively engages the audience in an exercise of imagination: what is the relationship of art and invisibility? In a time of social media, we continue the play and invite you, dear reader, to explore the (non)presence of Curme. All sorts of doubts will come to your mind but that is the goal of this special issue: to use art to stimulate and to provoke, to shake the doxa. Baraza discusses invisibility and silence as extreme forms of resistance. The tension between visibility and invisibility has been used

Table 1. Overview of papers in the special issue.

Contribution type	Author(s)	Title	Key insights to organizational paradoxes
Research Article	Willemoes-Wissing	The connoisseur's emancipation of dissonance: How the experience of tension in music can inform responses to organizational paradoxes	The experience of musical dissonance offers a novel lens for addressing organizational paradox by emancipating the inherent tensions into a structured yet flexible set of interdependent poles, enabling a sophisticated, adaptive response that appreciates complexity rather than simplifying or suppressing it.
Research Article	Baraza	Invisibility and Silence: An Extreme Form of Art Resistance of Aaron Curme	The art of invisibility and silence embodies a paradoxical resistance strategy by transforming absence and quietness (often markers of disempowerment) into subtle yet powerful forms of communicative protest, exposing contradictions within dominant social systems that portray persistent social failures as successes.
Research Article	Giraldo et al.	The Art-Business Paradox: How Do Artists Challenge Power?	Artistic resistance embodies the paradoxical tension between organized and disorganized forms of art, revealing that while organized artistic expressions can effectively challenge power structures through collective coherence, disorganized expressions offer spontaneous and unpredictable disruptions. Structure and spontaneity are both necessary but paradoxically interdependent components in societal resistance efforts.
Research Article	Walker	What Happens to a Dream Différed? Restive Capital and the Somnambulant Artist After the Colonization of the Dreamworld	The paradoxical relationship between work and leisure challenges conventional views of these as mutually exclusive categories; instead, they are revealed as inherently intertwined, mutually dependent, and persistently undecidable, reflecting broader tensions between autonomy and control within organizational settings
Poetry review	Badham	Clowns, pirates, poets and garbage collectors: the beauty of paradox in the poems of James March by Badham (see attachment)	Embracing paradox in organizational life calls for recognizing the beauty and value in accepting ambiguity, tension, and contradiction rather than exclusively seeking instrumental resolution, emphasizing a poetic appreciation of complexity and contradiction as enriching rather than problematic aspects of organizational existence.
Essay	Strati	Aesthetics and the paradoxical supremacy of ethics in organizational life	Organizations express a paradoxical tension in which ethical concerns implicitly suppress aesthetic expressions, highlighting the intertwined yet conflicted coexistence of ethical and aesthetic dimensions in everyday organizational practices.

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

Contribution type	Author(s)	Title	Key insights to organizational paradoxes
Essay	Kostera et al.	The paradox of art: A reflection on the existence of virtuality in a city-mind-scape	Art functions as a paradoxical medium in organizational contexts by simultaneously representing and resisting power structures. Artistic practices can reveal hidden tensions and contradictions between power and resistance through the imaginative interplay of virtual and physical spaces.

by artists to project their messages, notably by Banksy in contemporary arts (Cunha *et al.* 2021), but here it is taken to a different level. As the author notes, art pranksters sometimes explore/exploit the curiosity of the public to play not with what the object is so much as what it is not. The spirit of player/prankster present in this piece is fully aligned with the spirit of the special issue: the use of arts to challenge rather than to conform. In this case, we invite the readers to try to find more about Aaron Curme and to enter ‘paradoxal’ terrain: who is Aaron? What does it mean to be invisible? This paper is an invitation into the vizibilizing and invizibilizing of paradox (Tuckermann 2019), where Baraza and Curme together enact what might be called, borrowing Badham’s phrase (this volume), the work of a ‘paradoxeer’.

Giraldo and her coauthors analyze how the Colombian State has exerted control over performing arts cultural organizations, and how these organizations have developed resistance through irony and symbolic collective action. The study introduces the concept of ‘subsistence resistance’ and offers an empirical account of the paradoxes involved in resisting through constrained agency, contributing to paradox theory by highlighting how pragmatic paradoxes emerge from real-world power imbalances, and how artistic strategies become means of survival and subversion. It thereby expands our understanding of paradoxical resistance in practice.

Abraham Walker engages with the life and work of Louis Gabriel Gauny’s efforts to explore how he copes with three paradox dimensions: time, identity, and flexibility. He did not ‘select’ (either-or), ‘balance’ (both/and), escape (neither/nor), or other modes of release from the work-leisure tension. Instead, Gauny just accepts the poles in tension without any attempt at resolution. As the author says Gauny maintained an ‘indifferent disloyalty’ to ‘poles’. Ultimately, Gauny disidentifies from both worker and poet, rejecting work while refusing the full embrace of leisure, evading control while not claiming autonomy. Social critics do sometimes approach the work-leisure paradox by claiming for the liberation of leisure from the domination of work, but Gauny invites us to think about leisure as ‘conscripted in the service of work’. Leisure reenergizes the body to prepare it for work. The provocation is clear: leisure is work.

Richard Badham offers a delightful piece on the poetry of James March. March, as is widely recognized, is one of the colossi of our field, a giant of organizational scholarship. Yet he was also a poet. And he described leaders as plumbers-poets (March and Weil 2009). Therefore, it seemed adequate to explore his poetry. March’s poetry was not invisible, as reflected in the reference list of Badham’s essay. But Richard’s exploration of the lessons of

March's poetry constitutes, we believe, an important contribution to a more complete knowledge of James March. This is likely to become essential reading for future engagements with March's *oeuvre*.

Antonio Strati, in his essay *Aesthetics and the Paradoxical Supremacy of Ethics in Organizational Life*, interrogates the often-contested relationship between ethics and aesthetics. Drawing on his personal experience as a photographer and on a public response to the launch of his book *Riviera Mediterranea*, Strati reflects on how aesthetic joy intersects with ethical responsibility. Rather than treating these dimensions as separable or in tension, he proposes they are interwoven in lived experience. The arts, he argues, do not simply reflect reality but challenge us to envision and enact better worlds. A world devoid of beauty would be unbearable, but the search for beauty is never innocent. Strati calls us, as scholars, to reckon with the ethical challenge of aesthetic work.

Monika Kostera and her coauthors explore *The paradox of art: A reflection on the existence of virtuality in a city-mind-scape*, examining how artistic expression navigates and reveals paradoxical tensions between power and resistance within urban environments. Focusing on Warsaw's streets and the virtual space created through advertising, the paper guides us in exploring how art can challenge dominant narratives by uncovering hidden meanings and symbolic archetypes. Rather than reinforcing simplistic, linear perspectives promoted by power structures, art illuminates complexities and contradictions inherent in societal dynamics. Through artistic imagery, art serves as a crucial tool, disrupting traditional power relations and inviting reflective engagement with paradoxes in contemporary life.

3. Concluding remarks

Each piece in this special issue invites us to reconsider the role of paradox in organizing, not as a problem to solve but as a rhythm to follow, a space where aesthetics, ethics, and action overlap and offer possibilities for alternative futures. Our overarching aim has been to curate a collection of contributions at the intersection of the arts, power, organization, and paradox – works that are both intellectually rigorous and artistically provocative. These articles challenge the doxa not only through argument but through tone, stance, and sensibility. They are 'paradoxal' in spirit, respectfully irreverent, and committed to theory without sacrificing imagination. As (Schama 2022, p. 20) reminds us, 'I know a poem can't stop a tank. But the reverse is also true'. In that spirit, we offer this issue as an invitation for scholarship to stand with the arts in the ongoing struggle for freedom, imagination, and human dignity.

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