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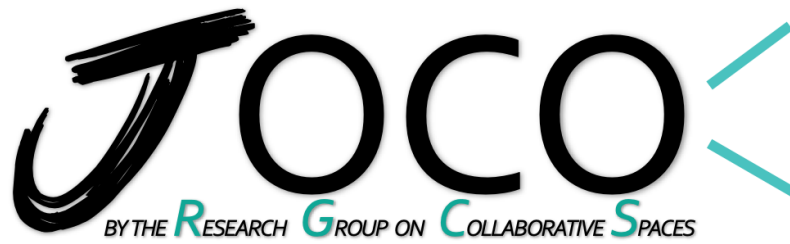
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PAGES

1-4

Non finito: (Pre-)modern ways of organizing creative work with Michel-Ange and Rodin
François-Xavier de Vaujany

5-14

The guest and the ghost: for an ethics of hospitality
Emilie Reinhold

15-28

Understanding ‘good vibe’ atmospheres in coworking spaces
Louise Suckley, Alexandra Bernhardt & Abbas Shieh

29-34

“Along with the winds of life” with Ella Hafermalz on Working and Existing with Technology
Gislene Feiten Haubrich

IN THIS ISSUE

Non finito : (Pre-)modern ways of organizing creative work with Michel-Ange and Rodin

François-Xavier de Vaujany¹

A few tourists in far too much of a hurry. People talking far too loudly. Photographers desperately searching for a good angle. A few aesthetes. There were a great many (too many) people that Thursday at the exhibition "[Michelangelo / Rodin. Living Bodies](#)" presented by the Musée du Louvre.

That didn't stop me from wandering through the Hall Napoléon, where the show runned from April 15 to July 20, 2026.

The idea was to highlight the connection between Michelangelo and Auguste Rodin. And moving through this exhibition, with the current and against it, I found it rather successful. The project of putting the genius of the Italian Renaissance in conversation with the "father" of modern sculpture works well. You could feel their shared obsession with muscular tension and the twisting of bodies as a place where souls express themselves.

Late that afternoon, I rediscovered the emotion I first felt on encountering the [Pietà at the entrance of St. Peter's Basilica](#) in Rome. That flesh surging out of stone. That sensation of marble magically brought to life. That discovery of a very human shiver just beneath the surface of rock. That poetry produced by beings whose lives weren't always poetic. I also recaptured one of those moments I look for whenever I "visit" an art exhibition. That instant when I feel caught, plucked up, watched, pierced through by a work. The [Fugit Amor](#) or the [Hand of God](#) both worked their full effect on me. They left me frozen, turned to stone myself, before the incredible movement of these masses we're told are simply resting there.

Taken as a whole, the exhibition, which brought together more than 200 works, was quite instructive and intriguing. It included marbles, bronzes, drawings, plaster casts, and a few very instructive installations.

The two giants of art, and of sculpture in particular, share a remarkable expressive power, even as each belongs to a very different artistic world.

[Michelangelo \(1475–1564\)](#) is emblematic of the Italian High Renaissance. His artistic work is a quest for divine perfection, for the ideal, for absolute beauty. With [David](#), the [Pietà](#), the [Moses](#), and the [Slaves](#), he pushed the artistic possibilities of his time to their furthest limits. In Michelangelo, the human body (especially the male body) is glorified in all its nobility, with unmatched anatomical mastery. The master sought "simply" to free the figure

from the block of marble. In his deepest conviction, the sculpture already existed there, within the stone. The body is idealized, immaculate, balanced, worked in perfect symmetry.

[Auguste Rodin \(1840–1917\)](#) is, in many respects, Michelangelo's heir. He himself claimed this lineage. His major works, from the [Thinker](#) to the [Burghers of Calais](#), by way of [The Kiss](#) or [The Gates of Hell](#), break with the most academic codes of his time. Rodin wants to embrace movement, to capture the unfinished and the rawest emotion. His artistic work is marked by deliberately rough, sketch-like surfaces. He seeks to express an existential storm, the tragedy of the human condition. His materials are as much bronze as marble. And there is an incredible modernity in his fragmentation of works and his staging of bodies.

As this exhibition made clear, the two sculptors share the same obsession with the truth of the body. They show the same unprecedented ability to breathe an inner life into stone or metal. [We know that Rodin studied Michelangelo during a decisive trip to Italy in 1875](#). He came back transformed, convinced that sculpture had to capture the soul as much as the form. Where Michelangelo raises man toward the divine, the eternal, the sublime, Rodin brings him back to his fragility and his humanity. One sculpts gods; the other sculpts men.

Old habits die hard... As I made my way through this experience, I was also struck by the difference in their philosophies of creation **and how these translate into the way they organized the creative process.**

Michelangelo maintained an almost mystical relationship with marble. For him, sculpture was not fabrication but revelation. As I said earlier, the figure already existed somewhere within the raw block. The sculptor only had to remove the excess material to set it free. The *Slaves* (or *Prisoners*) perfectly illustrate this philosophy: these figures, half-freed from the block, seem to struggle to emerge from the stone, as if Michelangelo had wanted to show the very process of revelation. The unfinished here is not a failure. It is, rather, a kind of ontological quasi-truth.

In practice, Michelangelo chose his own blocks of marble in Carrara himself, sometimes after weeks of obstinate searching. He worked alone, directly into the mass, without an intermediate full-scale model. He worked frontally, sculpting the way one unrolls a painting, from front to back. The master generally refused any

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delegation; he saw any assistance as a betrayal of the creative act (except for finishing touches, which had an even greater presence in the painted side of his work). His commitment was total. Michelangelo lived in a relationship of physical exhaustion with his material. He gave himself over entirely to creative work, sleeping little, eating little, forgetting himself completely.

Carried along by a spirit of modernity, Rodin carried out a revolution that was as organizational as it was artistic in his creative work. Trained in the tradition of 19th-century workshops, he adopted, and pushed to the extreme, the model of the division of creative labor. His process rested on a clearly defined chain.

Everything begins with conception, the artist's exclusive domain. Rodin modeled his forms in clay or plaster, often on a small scale. The fundamental creative gesture happens here. The twist of a torso, the position of a hand, the expression of a face are "conceived" at this stage. This visionary designer works fast, intuitively, sometimes assembling fragments of different bodies already conceived in earlier creations. This is often far from the exhaustion Michelangelo lived through and sought out. Rodin assembles and reassembles as much as he creates. All of this is very modern and strongly recalls the contemporary process of building on past creations.

Next comes the finishing work with the praticiens, specialized assistants. These delegates take over from the designer. Armed with the pointing machine (an instrument for transferring measurements), they faithfully reproduce the model in marble at the desired scale, mechanically transferring thousands of measurement points from the original. This work is highly technical, almost scientific.

Finally comes the final touch. Rodin returns to the scene of the crime. He steps back in at the end of the process to animate the surface. He refines the details, sharpens a gesture, deepens a gaze, heightens a tension. These finishing touches often give the work that characteristic vibration. Rodin knew exactly where his final intervention would make the difference.

Of course, this difference in the organization of creation leads to a radically different conception of the artwork itself.

Michelangelo produces absolute singularities. With him, every sculpture is irreducible, tied to a particular block, to a particular moment in life. The idea of a reproduction is almost inconceivable within his logic.

Rodin, by contrast, questions the very notion of the original and even challenges the usual terms of

attribution and ownership of a work. We move closer to the logics of duplication in our contemporary world. The same figure can exist in plaster, in marble, in bronze, in several sizes, assembled differently depending on the version. *The Thinker* exists in dozens of copies around the world. *The Gates of Hell* is a permanent work in progress that he reorganized for thirty years without ever finishing it. This logic is profoundly modern. It anticipates the questions the art of the 20th century would raise about reproducibility and the aura of the work — questions that digital technology and AI amplify even further today.

Ultimately, Michelangelo embodies the humanist ideal of the Renaissance. He is the universal artist, the solitary genius in direct communion with God and matter. Rodin, by contrast, is a child of the Industrial Revolution. He rationalizes creation and thinks in terms of process. His work unknowingly anticipates how the great workshops of contemporary art would come to function, from Brancusi to Koons, who would push this model to its most extreme logic, almost never touching their own works themselves.

Within these differences in their creative philosophies, I would like to dwell on one particular point that the exhibition proposed by the Louvre strongly foregrounds: **the use of the *Non finito*** (Baum, Bayer and Wagstaff, 2016; Mangone, 2021).

In Michelangelo, the unfinished acts as a metaphysical truth. It is not a deliberate aesthetic choice, but rather something far more troubling and ambiguous. His unfinished figures, like the *Prisoners* at the Accademia in Florence, seem to be prisoners of matter itself, halfway between being and non-being. We can never really know whether Michelangelo *wanted* to stop there or whether something interrupted his hand. We don't know whether an abandoned commission, a flawed block, a deep dissatisfaction forced him to stop where he did. This ambiguity makes the unfinished quality of his works all the more moving. The question remains eternally open and unresolved: is the figure struggling to escape the marble, or is the marble holding it back against its will? Both readings coexist, and Michelangelo ultimately never settles the matter.

This *non finito* is also linked to his conception of an ideal of perfection that is forever out of reach. Michelangelo was haunted by a permanent sense of failure in the face of what he was trying to express. For this absolute perfectionist, no work could ever truly be finished, because none could reach the divine perfection he was aiming for. The unfinished thus becomes the trace of a fundamental humility, the honesty of an infinite ambition confronted with the limits of the human condition. Yes,

whatever he did, Michelangelo remained a human being among other human beings. There is also, most likely, a theological dimension to this incompleteness. Raw matter is the earthly world; the form set free is the soul that longs for God. The unfinished sculpture literally represents the human soul still caught within the flesh, not yet freed.

With Rodin, the unfinished and incompleteness become something else² (Le Normand-Romain, 2014 and Giudicessi, 2020). They are a deliberate visual language. For the sculptor, the relationship to the unfinished is a fully conscious, fully mastered aesthetic tool. When a figure emerges half-formed from a block of raw marble (as in *The Hand of God*), that is not a sign of interrupted work. It is exactly what Rodin asked his praticiens to produce. **He decided where to stop, and that stopping point is a carefully considered artistic decision, tested beforehand with his prototypes.** For Rodin, the contrast between the polished surface of the flesh and the raw roughness of the block heightens the impression of life. The figure seems all the more alive, all the more vibrant, for being surrounded by inert matter. The unfinished creates a dramatic effect the finished could never produce. Just as the Impressionists left the brushstroke visible to suggest light rather than describe it, Rodin left the raw material visible to suggest the emergence of life rather than represent it statically.

At bottom, what separates the two men on this question comes down to a simple but very profound opposition. In Michelangelo, the unfinished escapes him. It is the mark of a struggle, a doubt, an impossibility. The artist wanted to go further, but something prevented him, whether external circumstances or the inner dissatisfaction of a perfectionist haunted by the absolute. In Rodin, the unfinished is fully owned. It is the result of a choice, an aesthetic calculation, a visual rhetoric. Rodin knows exactly the effect he produces, and produces it deliberately.

All of this speaks to our present moment. **Today, the unfinished quality of creation offered up by our capitalism follows a very different logic of organization.** Where Michelangelo touched the unfinished through an excess of ambition, and Rodin through a conscious aesthetic choice, capitalism produces incompleteness in a structural and deliberate way. It doesn't seek to reveal a fundamental truth; rather, through a frenzied and increasingly self-generated string of entertaining revelations, it mainly works to sustain a sense of lack.

The mechanism of our digital capitalism is at once simple and formidable. A product must never be delivered

complete, in retrospect. The iPhone had no USB-C port for ten years, then it did. The car doesn't have a certain feature, but it will in the next model. The video game ships with half its content, the rest to come as paid DLC. The software is in perpetual "beta version." The countless, barely credible bugs of a piece of software become the space in which a future version can develop. More mundanely, scrolling through social media and increasingly confessional conversations with AI work in the same way. The unfinished is no longer a trace of the creative process. It is the product itself, designed to be replaced.

The case of digital platforms is especially striking. Netflix, Spotify, social media, online games are open works in the literal sense, but of a perverse openness. They are never finished because they are designed to capture attention and sustain the relationship indefinitely. Infinite scroll is the *non finito* of digital capitalism. It slides across a surface with no edge, no end, no possible resolution. And the "intimacy dividends" of AI act in an even more perverse way, serving the self-generation of ever more personal and intimate data than ever before.

Michelangelo left a figure half-freed from the marble, and that incompleteness created an upward tension, toward the ideal, toward God, toward an impossible perfection. Infinite scroll creates a tension with no direction and no elevation: a horizontal agitation without end, which leads nowhere but back to itself. There is even a fascinating internal contradiction within contemporary capitalism on this question. On one hand, it produces the unfinished to stir up desire for the next version. On the other, it programs the death of objects, their degradation, their incompatibility, their obsolescence, in order to force renewal.

This, too, is the exact inverse of Rodin. The French sculptor chose *where to stop* so that the work would be more alive. Capitalism chooses when to kill off the product so the cycle can start again. One makes a birth out of the unfinished; the other makes a programmed death.

After walking back through the exhibition in reverse for one last look, I finally left the Hall Napoléon.

In the end, I was moved by this rather successful conversation. Of course, I also had a few surprises. There's no escaping, here, a certain vision of the solitary, heroic, prophetic genius. A bit more fragility around the uncommon fates of these two men might have served the argument even better. I was also struck by the rather

² See also de Vaujany, Pulk and Lenglet (2026) on this issue of incompleteness.

limited presence of the female body in these two bodies of work — at times a space onto which the masculine projects itself, at times mere anatomy. The visit could have used a slightly more critical commentary, some counterpoints from other female bodies, or a female perspective on these male and female bodies. A third figure might have enriched the conversation, Camille Claudel, Barbara Hepworth, or Niki de Saint Phalle among others. But that might have broken the powerful thread of lineage running through the show. I also occasionally missed a stronger sense of perspective on art history, a contrast drawn between two historical periods and their aesthetics. But for an exhibition this instructive and accessible, one can't do everything.

On my way out, I took the opportunity for one more detour through the Louvre's permanent collections... a small habit made possible by the free access granted by the auditeur card. I settled once again in front of a few works whose presence I love: [*The Raft of the Medusa*](#), [*Liberty Leading the People*](#), then the [*Venus de Milo*](#). A few quieter ancient or medieval pieces as well.

And once again I savor that experience of an artistic work that exceeds every possibility of an article: its mystery.

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The guest and the ghost: for an ethics of hospitality

Emilie Reinhold³

Abstract

On the critical side of business ethics there is a fascinating field of research dedicated to embodied ethics: an ethics based on openness or what the Australian philosopher Rosalyn Diprose has called corporeal generosity (2002). In this field, the theme of hospitality, seen as openness to the guest, has not been addressed in detail. The present essay is a playful theoretical paper dealing with guests and ghosts, somewhat different bodies, Others who could bring embodied change to our organisations. Two reconsidered empirical cases, 'the naked manager' (2014) and the 'artist in the bank' (2017) are first used to deconstruct the idea of corporeal generosity. To introduce the idea of the guest, two similar fictions, a film by Pasolini (1968) and a book by Ali Smith (2005), are confronted. Jacques Derrida's lecture on hospitality (1997/2000) is then used to distinguish the other from the Other. The main goal of the essay is to sketch out what embodied ethics could look and feel like in our organisations, giving inspiration for people to practise it in their workplaces.

Keywords: Embodied ethics; Otherness; Playfulness; Sexuality; Death; Fiction

Introduction

While researching organisations like banks, consulting firms or accounting agencies, one cannot really speak of embodied organisations. Surely humans and their bodies work there but processes, rules, technologies, dress codes or the strict organisation of space make them disappear, as if their voices and bodies had weakened. I remember reading a contribution around 2012 called "I do not take my body to work" but I cannot remember where it was, probably a forgotten conference paper. This has now become reality. The development of artificial intelligence and robots dehumanize work: in some contexts, bodies are simply not needed anymore, and we are kindly asked to stay online. With the development of communication technologies and the recent lockdowns, there has been a further dematerialisation of work with on-line meetings or on-line shopping, with everyone adapting to even greater disembodiment. How is it then possible to talk about embodied ethics?

Embodied ethics emerged at the critical side of management studies around 2010: the idea was to put the body and senses at the core of debates about ethics, which could also bring more concrete politics into ethics. Critical scholars tackle difficult theories, from Spinoza to Levinas and back again, but also bring new theories into the field of business ethics, for example Bracha Ettinger

(Kenny & Fotaki, 2015) or Rosalyn Diprose (Hancock, 2008) (Pullen & Rhodes, 2014). The main problem however is that the field is highly theoretical, leaving the reader with the impression that embodied ethics remains a utopia in organisational life: ethical moments of recognition and joy are merely beautiful ideas that rarely happen in real life. In this context, the main goal of the present essay is to inspire its readers to practise embodied ethics in their everyday life, and more specifically at work.

Now why does that matter in the first place? We are nothing else than our bodies and if we want good relationships at work, we should be in contact with other bodies, not only colleagues but also clients or unknown persons. Work can produce good relations, solidarity, humour and even hope, even if we often hear about fear, toxic relations and bullying. In intellectual professions the body can be ignored: in American banks for example it can happen that employees enslave themselves, to an extreme point of illness and for no other reason than work itself (Michel, 2011). Michel's article shows how bodies are enslaved in modern times, without managers and without any visible terror. It also shows how in the end ethics happen through the body, thanks to the body and its suffering, hence the limits it imposes on work. My essay explains how the power of imagination linked to bodies' natural joy and openness can show us the way to a more meaningful work life, even in intellectual work or what has been called "bullshit jobs" (Graeber, 2018).

If corporate ethics is an impossibility (Bevan & Corvellec, 2007), it is because the organisation itself is an abstract entity only striving for its own survival. "An organisation is bereft of subjectivity. It cannot open itself toward and experience the infinite otherness of the Other; it is bloodless, insensible, incapable of consciousness or intention." (ibid). While striving for survival it tends to produce and reproduce the same, to normalize and homogenize, further closing down possibilities. Only humans, animals and their living bodies could open up organisations, criticize them and change them for the better.

Drawing on the broad field of business ethics, I will first demonstrate the necessity of embodied ethics and link it to hospitality as a value and to openness of bodies. Derrida's concept of hospitality has recently been used by authors in social science, namely in psychiatry (Uvais & Rahman, 2025) and in philosophy (Gallego-Ortiz, 2025), which can help management scholars to move away from the main acceptance of the term in their field: hospitality

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applied to the tourism industry. Linked to openness of bodies is Diprose's concept of corporeal generosity (2002), which I will deconstruct both theoretically and through two revisited empirical cases of bodies who see themselves as generous. The Danish case of the naked manager, a founding director of Zentropa who likes to walk around naked in the workplace (Sorensen & Villadsen, 2014) is compared to the French case of the artist working for J. P. Morgan and trying to change human relations inside the bank (Reinhold, 2017). Both cases show how corporeal generosity, if practised by one individual, can appear like vampirism, when the other is somehow consumed by subjective fantasies. Embodied ethics is a collective and conscious phenomenon and is linked to openness of bodies. This is why, in the next section, some organisational situations are imagined where openness of bodies could produce joyful encounters and hence ethical moments of humanity. Imagination is then taken one step further with the idea of the guest, the unknown person coming to stay in the organisation. The guest has three main characteristics: they are a questioning person, they have sexual power, and they are a travelling person, which links them to the ghost. Two fictions, a film by Pasolini (1968) and a novel by Ali Smith (2005), are analysed to show the specific power of guests. This is followed by an interlude with Derrida's idea of absolute hospitality, which can only be an ideal, but which is central to embodied ethics. Welcoming the other, the Other and others is at the core of ethics, even though it can be frightening because of ghosts and the risk of death.

The necessity of embodied ethics

The emergence of business ethics as a distinct discipline in the 1980s was concomitant with the birth of stakeholder theory and the urge to integrate business and society (ten Bos, 1997). Business ethicists are persons who help managers to formulate ethical rules, possibly also creating tools that could measure levels of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and thus satisfy new standards of public morality for business activities. The reliance on "moral technologies" in business ethics has been described as a tactic to fight the melancholia and emptiness lurking at the core of organisations (ten Bos, 2003). In a more recent empirical enquiry, Eric Gautier clearly shows how CSR has been instrumentalised by big firms and simply added to corporate performance measures, making it totally opposed to workers' engagement for society or moral aspirations (Gautier, 2023). Ethics are probably more about actions and gestures than about written words or codes of conduct, which gives our bodies an important role. Spoken words and the copresence of workers are important for ethical moments to occur, for example in the care for coworkers (Antoni, Reinecke, & Fotaki, 2020).

Critical Management Studies (CMS) have been identified as a strategic ally for the development of the field of business ethics (Prasad & Mills, 2010). In organisations the ethical subject is always a political subject: the one who takes action to respond to an injustice. Indeed politics and ethics cannot be conceived of separately (McMurray, Pullen, & Rhodes, 2011). Refusing the dualism between reason and emotions in the theorisation of ethics (ten Bos & Willmott, 2001), scholars have reflected on the importance of the body and bodies, soon forging a fascinating field of research interested in embodied ethics (see special issue in *Organization* in 2015). These engaged scholars have introduced very useful theoretical tools, from Rosalyn Diprose (Hancock, 2008) (Pullen & Rhodes, 2014) or Baruch Spinoza (Thanem & Wallenberg, 2015) to Bracha Ettinger (Kenny & Fotaki, 2015). The focus on embodiment and physicality is often linked but not restricted to feminist thinkers: a harmony has indeed been identified between feminist ethics and business ethics (Borgerson, 2007). Concepts such as corporeal generosity, the matrixial, care, compassion or hospitality propose rethinking what ethics are about, not necessarily to relate them to everyday situations but rather to contrast them with more rationalist conceptions based on Rawls, Kant or Aristotle. In this paper I will focus embodied ethics linked to hospitality, with a special attention for real or imagined relations. Embodied ethics are linked to human vulnerability and incompleteness: it is something we must experience on our skin and in the folds making up our subjectivity.

Ethics is not something that rules or reason can teach us, as its link to theology perhaps also shows. Religious values sometimes guide our most personal actions, and hospitality, the way we receive a guest, is one of these values linked to simple humanity. Hospitality is not only to receive a guest, but also to make sure they are warm, comfortable, fed properly and in a general way relieved. The church and its various organisations have this tradition of hospitality, mainly through monasteries where it is possible to stay while traveling, where pilgrims or wanderers are still welcome today. Nevertheless, theologians are careful not to dispense with rules and principles in ethics and surprisingly they began to embody ethics much earlier than organisational scholars (Leahy, 1986). Perhaps the body's basic needs are so obvious to everyone that no rule is needed. We could also state in a very general way, that bodies bear their own truth, like blushing, being hurt or showing marks from work or practice of a music instrument, which makes care for another body quite easy and instinctive. Now the question is: which organisations really care for our bodies?

Scholars in embodied ethics insist on the openness of bodies. Openness varies across occupations and

personalities but broadly speaking, an open body is flexible, casual, fragile and sexual. Emotions and affects are not hidden and there is an interest in others' emotions and affects. There could be attraction, indifference or repulsion between bodies but in the end, as the famous Spinoza quote goes, "no one has yet determined what the body can do" (Thanem & Wallenberg, 2015: 20). The body remains open to experiences and possibilities, and in extreme sports, arts in general or classical music, we could say that it pushes itself to the nearly impossible.

In small businesses workers and managers are necessarily close to each other, relations can hence be embodied, but in corporations with many employees, complicated rules and processes, compliance officers and CSR departments, it is hard for bodies to be open and natural. They are in a way surrounded by and stuck into corporate language. As we will show below, Rosalyn Diprose's concept of corporeal generosity (2002), though it has been used to conceptualize the openness of bodies, is unable to inspire conscious human relations.

The problem with corporeal generosity

Openness is often linked to characteristics considered as feminine, like empathy, compassion, understanding and care for the other, and as such it is a bit of a trap, suggesting that only maternal individuals can perform generosity, relying on their experience of the mother-infant relationship. It would in fact be easy to find arguments for a predominantly feminine embodied generosity, both in theory and practice, women often being those who perform care and listening in organisations. But let me take a closer look at Diprose's concept of corporeal generosity as it has been used to develop embodied ethics in organisation studies.

"A profoundly corporeal, pre-reflexive and thus aesthetic openness to the radical 'Other' involves a mode of *givenness* and therefore recognition" (Hancock, 2008: 1368); it is the very open nature of our bodies that connects us to other bodies before any conscious act of generosity. The term *givenness* in fact implies passivity, as in this other passage: "to be ethical is to *respond* to the other with generosity" (Pullen & Rhodes, 2014: 787). Indeed, it seems that we must wait for the other to be active and then accept his/her infiltration in our affective sphere, as if everything was happening at the level of particles. Corporeal generosity thus simply means to be open and ready to engage with others, to recognize them as humans. Still, it happens at an unconscious pre-reflexive level: there is "an affective dimension where bodies move and respond to other bodies whilst recognizing them as unassimilable" (Ibid: 788). As bodies move in this pre-personal dimension the paradox is that the other cannot be the other: we are merely bodies

without any clear subjectivity or even difference. We can sense the difficulty of thinking an ethic made only of affects where giving is in fact not really giving but simply being present. Furthermore, if bodies are unassimilable to each other, they are surely protected from manipulation or annihilation but at the same time, there are no great possibilities in the encounters with others. The sometimes-risky dimension of a sexual encounter is precisely what is thrilling about sex, and this thrill can also be present when very different bodies meet in a working context. When unknown persons arrive or new affects arise, it can create new situations and question the rules of the game in our organisations.

Corporeal generosity is also problematic in the context of the large corporation because some bodies are simply absent or disembodied and consequently do not respond while others, the present ones, will never get the physical recognition they need, no matter how much they give to the community. All bodies are not equally present, as "the present is a moment to be continually evaded as masculinities seek their own self-validation in the conquest of future externalities, for this is what it means to be a man." (Knights, 2014). In this article David Knights asks if disembodied masculinities undermine organisational ethics and his answer is clearly yes, which again links embodied ethics to a specific feminine behaviour, a capacity to be present here and now which seems harder for masculine beings.

Indeed, the theory of embodied generosity seems to put all bodies at the same level in an overflowing life force disrupting the self, which seems a very unlikely situation in organisational life, unless we think of a particularly joyful Christmas party where all members of the organisation would have forgotten about their professional identities. During Halloween celebrations people can also be open to the possibility of the other, even creating an uncanny space of hospitality (Kelly & Riach, 2018), but this also remains a seasonal exception, a bit like carnivals which offered possibilities for feelings to be relieved but in fact had the ultimate function of preserving social order. To gain political power the concept of embodied generosity needs to be connected to problems of disembodiment and inequality between bodies.

Going back to Rosalyn Diprose's text (2002) is useful because she also gives a political dimension to her concept, a dimension that is not so present in the papers analysed above. Generosity is openness to others and requires choice on the part of the giver. Magnanimity, another term for generosity, is giving to others beyond the call of duty: in this sense paying taxes cannot be considered generous. Noble desire, without calculation or

expectation of return, is the basis of generosity, like when you open your house to a guest. The problem is that we live in a society where the right of private property, individualism and utility dominate most interactions. Still, for Diprose, generosity is the primordial condition of personal, interpersonal and communal existence. Generosity is not the expenditure of one's possession but the dispossession of oneself. This quote from the introduction is important because it shows that generosity has some characteristics of the sacrifice or even the loss of self, which is perhaps what the authors cited above have identified as pre-personal, and which I will investigate through hospitality and openness to the guest. As we will see in the next section, bodies who practice a certain form of generosity are not always welcome in the organisation and they could even be harmful, both for themselves and for others.

Two outstanding and generous bodies?

We now turn to two reconsidered empirical cases, one of these taking place in a highly disembodied organisation. The story of the naked manager, a man imposing his nude body and physical solicitations on employees (Sorensen & Villadsen, 2014), can be contrasted with the story of an artful back-office employee in a very strict American investment bank in Paris. Like the naked manager, this person is unveiling herself to others through individual and collective art performances in her workplace. Even if she does not show her skin, she somehow imposes her body. Her action is a resistance to norms of invisibility and elegance and she herself describes artists as generous, meaning they give their time and energy to anonymous and sometimes reluctant spectators. Surely her subaltern position in the bank does not give her body the power of a manager's body: employees do not feel compelled to engage with her. In a sense her generosity is unexpected and disturbing, her body is unwanted in the disembodied organisation, creating a few situations of embarrassment. The art performances she did during lunch time with a group of contemporary dancers have been described in detail (Reinhold, 2017), but what is more interesting in the present paper are her everyday micro-performances at work: wearing noisy and colourful clothes where the norm is absolute discretion, stepping into the open-space with a loud hello, developing a creative tactic to get into the elevator and surprise colleagues, improvising a dance with the doorman. In general, her idea is to shake her colleagues who are numb and unwilling to relate to each other. Some persons do not even say hello to each other in the bank, which is considered insulting in France. Her acts of generosity are linked to openness as she unveils her artist identity and uses her body as a vehicle for political action in a very hostile and impersonal context. It is not as much about care and compassion as about provocation and this is something she has in common with the naked

manager. A female body that is not behaving as expected and somehow suggesting an untamed sexuality is not so far from the boss' undressing in front of an employee. In both cases a great discomfort is created in the workplace, which shows that open bodies are not necessarily wanted or trusted by others.

The power in the artist's alternative embodiment lies in the relations she nevertheless manages to create with some colleagues, both men and women who accept playing with her and creating moments of joyfulness and proximity. The naked manager in the Danish film production company seems to create a different situation: his management style being totally impulsive and exaggeratedly embodied creates an impossibility for employees to resist. In fact, employees could ask themselves if they need to take off their clothes to be at the same level as the boss, to take a sauna or a swim with him to negotiate a pay raise, but this would surely be a trap, especially for women who would then risk appearing as openly sexual. He also goes around hugging employees to feel their energy, which can be considered as harassment nowadays, especially in the creative industries where the #MeToo movement started in 2017. As with the artist in the bank, his embodied generosity seems to have no positive effect, partly because it is stemming from one individual working on his difference to change others. Organisational life cannot be about imposing oneself on others.

The moments the artist still managed to create in the bank were humanly rich for participants. What was ethical in these moments was that bodies stepped out from their professional roles to simply recognize others as bodies, which means vulnerable and somewhat ridiculous humans. Even in a chic bank in one of the chicest squares in Paris, bodies are just bodies. Acts of embodied generosity must find a response in the organisation otherwise they will merely appear as sacrifices in the case of the artist in the bank (in the long run her artistic action costed her more deception than joy: in fact she never managed to get any strong aesthetic answers and the gift became a hurting sacrifice) or as aggression in the case of the naked manager. If artists are generous, they are also longing for recognition, and if that does not arrive, they often become angry and sad, a dreadful combination of feelings.

Depending on the kind of organisation they are working in, individuals will develop different tactics of generosity to reach out to their colleagues, but these tactics are grounded in individual convictions, which of course can be problematic if they appear as too personal. Organisational life means being able to keep the right distance from others: often bodies remain closed to look

uncompromising but also humble and curious. Having this attitude, it is possible to meet the other, the coworker, client or manager, in short, the other who is not me.

Both cases described above seem like vampirism, when the other is somehow consumed by our subjective fantasies. Both the naked manager and the artist in the bank are trying to integrate colleagues in their personal world, and as such they are not good examples of generosity. How do we open up to others without paying the cost of a sacrifice and without appearing as sexual maniacs? Openness and generosity need to be activated through our imagination; indeed, which situations could permit mutual recognition or joyful encounters (Thanem & Wallenberg, 2015)?

Imagining open bodies in our workplaces

It is hard to imagine joy at work, as our bureaucratic ethos has taught us that work and pleasure should be hermetically separated. Activities are carefully scheduled in time and space and work, especially intellectual work, seems to produce closed bodies. If work is often invading our personal life the opposite is rather rare: we generally do not listen to our affects at work, or if we do, we remain careful not to show them too much. But is it not with colleagues with whom we spend nearly as much time as with our families that we should socialise best and reinvent the world? Why is it that we are so eager to cut them away from our life? What are we trying to protect if not our private life and our perceived integrity?

Embodied generosity does not seem to be about resistance to the organisation, rather it is about staying true to the body and the senses and refusing desexualisation. Perhaps the concept should be linked to sexuality and desire to avoid being only about care and a tamed femininity. To be open would mean to perceive colleagues as sensual beings and develop new affects and relations at work. It would mean an affirmation of life and some daring behaviour, between provocation and improvisation, a thinking in terms of affective possibilities and not in terms of prohibition. This attitude should be conscious and collective, a gesture leading to a talk, a walk leading to dance. Practices of openness do not need to be extreme or radical: it could be to experiment with clothes, to dress up or down, to move differently, to invite a colleague to dance in the corridor, to introduce a meeting or end a lunch with some music, to share a barbecue in the courtyard, to get rid of ugly corporate decoration or to have a yoga session in the garden. These experiments pretty much resemble simple childlike play, but they have a power linked to gesture: they interrupt intellectual work to put bodies in relation. It could also be to invite family or friends to visit the workplace or to bring

personal objects to the office, some mugs, exotic masks or a child's drawing for instance. In an investment bank all this is unthinkable, but in more creative contexts it could even be welcomed. (It is important to mention here is that I am talking about contagious individual initiatives, not about managerial team building activities.)

Movement and its sensuality are central. Collective spaces can be occupied and experimented with: walking in the corridors with high heels, dancing in the hall, sleeping on a couch in the open space, making a booklet in the photocopy room, doing some graffiti in the underground car park, planting flowers on the terrace, arriving at dusk or staying late to feel the atmosphere when no one is working. These actions are not necessarily aimed at the other, they are not about looking for recognition, they could be very selfish and devoid of meaning, but they clearly affirm the body in space. They are generous in the sense that the body is relaxed and naturally invites others into a sphere of wellbeing and sensuality. Sleeping is perhaps the best example of abandon and openness and the anti-world of organisation (Hancock, 2008). All these actions are conscious extensions of the body, both unproductive and pleasurable. They are focused on gestures rather than words, which gives us the possibility to "exercise our bodily capacities in concert with others (...) for our mutual and open-ended flourishing" (Thanem & Wallenberg, 2015: 248).

Bodily capacities clearly include sexuality. Work and sex do not have a good relationship, especially since the #MeToo movement, but they are related and both corporations and employees know that. Inviting someone into our embodied sphere (or bubble) also makes a sexual encounter possible and this is strictly prohibited at work, at least in "serious" occupations that necessarily exclude dirty bodies. All forms of sexuality would pollute perfect bodies groomed for intellectual work, but work is also something sexy and suggestive, especially if you like your work. Let us be honest: romances are very common at work, at least in France, and the word "sexy" is often used to describe inspiring presentations. Sexuality is at the core of humanity and openness of bodies thus presupposes acceptance of sexuality's chaotic and ambiguous presence.

This leads me to the idea of the guest, the person who is invited to a place, a home or an organisation to stay a certain time. In fact, the artist in the bank invited her artist friends to make performances during lunchtime (it was once a trend for businesses to have artists in residence). Guests are not members of the organisation, but they are expected and sometimes highly desired. This is especially true in the disembodied organisation where not so much is happening, and most managers are

travelling around the world to conquer new markets, some people are working from home and clients or service users are away. At universities we speak about guest researchers: they are people staying for a few months to whom we give an office, but they clearly have an ambiguous status. How long could a guest researcher stay and what is exactly their role?

The guest in fiction

Research in business ethics can benefit from creative approaches linked to arts or fiction. Speculative fiction (Sayers et al., 2021) can enable imaginative responses to current problems, as the ecological crisis, and provide a valuable resource for critical inquiry and theory-making. Using fiction can also bring enchantment to business ethics (Bell et al., 2021) and to introduce the guest it seems perfect, as “the mood of enchantment begins with surprise and is the pleasurable feeling of being charmed by the novel and as yet unprocessed encounter” (ibid: 256). Using fiction at this point of the paper means going one step further, from revisited empirical material to imagined organisational situations, and then from there to settings invented by artists. We will rely on what two authors have seen as meaningful situations to better understand our main issue: hospitality in ethics. The guest is both frightening and sexy, as we will see in the following analysis of a film and novel, which were chosen for their great artistic qualities and their similar plots. Both works were re-analysed for the purpose of this paper, linking them to the visiting artist and the issue of hospitality. To be someone’s guest implies to be invited and to behave politely and adapt to the house, home or organisation. It implies understanding the norms, the language and to participate in conversations and tasks. The client in a hotel is often called a guest, but a paying guest is not a visitor or a friend, as nothing special is expected from them. On the contrary, in a family a guest can be more or less integrated and what is expected is that they leave at some point.

Pier Paolo Pasolini’s film *Theorema* came out in 1968. It is a psychological drama taking place in a rich Milanese family: the father owns a factory, the mother is a housewife, and they have two teenagers, Odetta and Pietro. There is also a maid in the big bourgeois house. The film begins when a visitor is announced and comes to stay with them for some time. This uninvited and unexpected guest is in fact a kind of angel: played by Terence Stamp, he is dressed in white and mostly sits and reads in the garden. He has very few words. He is a simple presence that the family quickly gets used to. In some strange way, each member of the family, even the maid, will fall in love with him. He is not asexual and Pasolini stages his arrival with one of his favourite actors: the curly and ever-happy Ninetto Davoli, here playing the postman.

The visitor gives himself to all five members of the family, bringing them to some kind of personal truth. He becomes a key character in their lives, the start of a great change, until he announces, at the climax of the drama, that he will have to leave tomorrow. As in other Pasolini films, there are many religious themes: the miracle (the maid), the giving up of a leading role and possessions (the father), the purity of love (with the teenagers) but also the carnal temptation (with the mother). What interests me here is the fact that he is a guest, seemingly a total stranger to this family, and that he will end up transforming them all, until death or existential crisis. The family is an organisation of a special kind and there are also family businesses, but families tend to be rather closed organisations, where a guest needs to be invited and announce how long time they will stay. It is unusual nowadays to have a visitor without any clear function or mission but in *Theorema* this visitor is apparently highly desired. In fact, the general impression is that Pasolini is taking great pleasure in the destruction of the bourgeois family, not only because sex is prohibited or silenced but also because relations are false. The wife plays her role, as do the teenagers and the father, but they are all lying and suffering from their condition.

Let me now turn to a more recent work: Ali Smith’s novel *The Accidental*, published in 2005. The plot could be influenced by *Theorema*: a guest arrives in a family’s house pretending her car has broken down. There are two teenagers in the summer rental house in Norfolk, a boy called Magnus and a girl called Astrid. Amber, the guest, is an ageless woman, described as fit, beautiful and smart. The mother Eve is a writer, and the stepfather Michael is a university teacher having inappropriate relations with his students. In fact, when Amber arrives Eve suspects her of being a former affair of Michael. The style is quite deconstructed, each part of the book giving a different point of view, showing the flow of consciousness of often confused characters. The general impression is poetic and enigmatic, in the vein of Virginia Woolf. We do not know what Amber is looking for, where she comes from and when she will leave. Each member of the family likes her, some of them also in a sexual way. The son, who she calls St Magnus, has his first sexual encounter with her, which ends up with them making love in the church or in the bushes during that hot summer. Astrid, the daughter, strolls around in the countryside with her, taking pictures and reflecting on life. Michael is also attracted but upset when he realizes he will not have sex with her. Only Eve seems more distant and finally, she is also the one who throws out Amber. When Amber leaves, summer is probably over, and we imagine that she will have to sleep in her car. Amber gives the impression of having no plans and nowhere to stay, which makes her more a potential parasite than a guest. There is something destructive and

threatening in her, probably the fact that she is trying to redeem herself from a near-fatal car accident, in which she accidentally killed a little child. But this is not sure, it is what Eve says. Amber thus has all the characteristics of a mysterious guest who could also become a frightening ghost popping up from someone's past. As in *Theorema* she brings a period of joy to a nuclear family but ends up emptying their home in London of all their belongings, leaving a message for them on the answering machine that they should face up to their past. She is like a mirror for them, perhaps just their bad conscience. The family is then partly destroyed, not only by the theft of their belongings but also by the fact that the mother Eve is leaving for a long trip.

Both fictions show how a stranger comes into a family, eats at their table and questions the rules, the habits and even the way close people love each other or have ceased to love each other. The stranger in these fictions has a power to question not only relations and balance but also the origin of these relations. The stranger-guest is not expected; they always abuse the hosts, going a bit too far and taking advantage of the spaces and the attention of the hosts. The arrival of such an abusive guest can change the hosts irremediably, like in *Theorema* where they all end up in an existential crisis. In *The Accidental* the angel becomes a thief, asking the family members to be honest with their past, as though she was some kind of judge or God herself. Both angels in these stories seem to have a diabolic mission and both use seduction to reach their goal. Being in a family and soothing all its members gives them a position of outsider that can be very attractive both for themselves and for others, but in the end, they destroy the family or disorganise it to the point of implosion. If the family is an organisation, then all organisations would need to have such a questioning guest from time to time. Such persons - angels, strangers, ghosts - also re-sexualize the organisation and even if they often bring a frightening truth, they come with innocent love and high levels of desire. To further enquire about guests, let us now turn to a lecture about hospitality.

Interlude with Jacques Derrida

In a lecture about hospitality (1997/2000), Jacques Derrida expounds his ideas about the figure of the guest seen as a foreigner, taking inspiration from ancient Greece. In many of Plato's dialogues, he states, it is the foreigner (*xenos*) who questions. Still, the foreigner fears he will be treated as mad, perhaps like all people asking questions in a language they have not mastered. Socrates plays the foreigner he is not, the disturbing man of question. He declares that he is "foreign" to the language of the courts; as such he is *like* a foreigner. This could be a trick of philosophy, and by extension of political activists or artists: to ask stupid and very basic questions.

Nevertheless, says Derrida, there are some rights for foreigners in Athens, which means they can ask for hospitality and stay for some time. The host's first question to the foreigner is: what is your name?

This is not the case for the absolute Other, the barbarian, who cannot even have a name or a family name. According to Derrida, "absolute hospitality requires that I open up my home and that I give not only to the foreigner, but to the absolute, unknown, anonymous other, and that I *give place* to them, that I let them come, that I let them arrive, and take place in the place I offer them, without asking of them either reciprocity (entering into a pact) or even their names" (page 25).

What is interesting here is that the other becomes the Others, them, many guests, perhaps a whole family with many cousins or a horde of animals. The pact of reciprocity he is talking about is probably linked to the foreigner's function in the house and the duration of their stay. It is hard to imagine a situation of absolute hospitality: welcoming a total stranger without asking them anything in return, not even their name: it seems that this could only happen in fictions. Even if we have the means to do that, we would be afraid of the ghosts they bring, the traumas, the dreams, the unknown desires, the diseases perhaps. Some families are more open than others but if they have strangers staying for longer periods, it is mostly to earn money or to have work done. The absolute Other thus remains an ideal. In the film and novel we analysed previously this ideal Other was staged and we could feel the great pleasure Pasolini and Smith had in destructing the falsehood of the family.

The guest, even if they are well received, is first of all a foreigner, and he must remain a foreigner. Hospitality remains conditional. Derrida senses that it is sometimes hard to distinguish between a guest and a parasite and that a law is needed. What that law could look like is linked to blood or territory or maybe lapse of time. Here we surely think about asylum seekers, refugees and migrants, human beings fleeing wars and catastrophes, when an entire country becomes the home we are talking about, like in 2022 for Ukrainians fleeing the Russian invasion, like in 1948 for Palestinians and the list could be extended... But the guest could also be an artist, a person going through some kind of existential crisis who needs a new context, or a person escaping their own family who has betrayed or simply neglected them. Many women unfortunately need to flee their families because of domestic violence. Poor workers often have difficulties paying for a rented appartement. There are many difficult situations and wandering souls, even in Europe.

Up until recently, European countries have liked to see themselves as welcoming countries, but the question remains: how much do they ask from foreigners? Furthermore, is it possible for a foreigner to become a citizen at a certain point? Transposed to the organisation: is it possible for the guest researcher to become a full member of the university at some point? What does that change? Do they lose their power of disturbance? The guest being the annoying person who asks the difficult questions, it could be that the organisation does not want to integrate them. It could also be that they, being wanderers, want to keep to their own research agenda.

Talking about Oedipus coming back from travels and being called a wanderer who is not native but still asking for shelter and hospitality, the sentence in Derrida's text is: "this foreign guest appears like a ghost" (page 37). Indeed, Oedipus is not a real foreigner, he is coming back after many years of travelling, in the conditions we have heard about, having killed his father and slept with his mother. This foreign guest hence appears like a frightening ghost.

The words *guest* and *ghost* seem to have a common etymology, for example in Swedish *gäst* (guest) and *gäst* (old fashioned word for ghost) there are only two dots difference, a closeness in sounds that we also hear in English. Given Derrida's obsession with words and etymology, this is not trivial, and it also echoes both fiction works we presented above, where the unexpected guest was a threat to the family. When a guest is coming, there is always the possibility that they will either be a ghost or bring ghosts with them. Still if we practice absolute hospitality, we must be ready to let in the Other and all following creatures.

From what we have seen up until now in this paper, we can conclude that the guest, sometimes also a ghost, has three main characteristics: they are a questioning person, have sexual power and are a travelling person. All this is hard to imagine in the disembodied organisation that values rules, professional relations and well-defined functions. Only travelling is perhaps accepted and valued in our modern organisations. If we consider that embodied ethics are about hospitality, the organisation must be more open to unknown guests, at the risk of diseases, terrorism or simple folly. Resistance always has a cost, as Alessia Contu (2008) so brilliantly demonstrated, and it is the same with ethics: if ethics are to be practiced for real, at least at the level of human relations, members of the organisation must be prepared to bear some costs.

Welcoming the unknown Other (discussion)

The other can be anyone who is not me, including children, family, lovers and friends and at work all

persons we are in relation with: clients, co-workers, managers, students, cleaners, assistants, consultants, foreigners, robots (?), artificial intelligence (?), animals (?). The other begins somewhere where the "me" ends, and at the same time I am nothing without others defining and challenging me. The Other is something else: often called the absolute Other, we are talking about a total stranger, an unknown person who cannot even have a name as we have seen with Jacques Derrida, and perhaps most importantly who does not speak our language, at least not fully. This barbarian is a kind of ideal for an ethics of hospitality: if we can welcome the Other (in our minds at least) then we should be ready to welcome others in a good way, hence behave ethically, with hospitality and tolerance, with curiosity and desire. Diprose writes about noble desire, meaning desire with good intentions, a desire that is somehow above basic sexual instincts. Sexuality surely has dark sides, but it cannot be erased from our lives. As sexuality links us to all others (and not only to our biological family) it is along with friendship or passion, at the core of ethics.

Besides, both the visitor in Pasolini's film and Amber in *The Accidental* remain mysterious characters, their main function being to reveal the other characters. But we must also remember that we could be in the guest's or the ghost's role, searching for something that is hard to define and provoking strong reactions in others' subjectivities. As a guest researcher in three Scandinavian universities, I had a great freedom, and I really liked this position, even if it was sometimes hard to push my research agenda. I had my own funding and was given an office, often shared with others or with boxes of books or odd leftover furniture. Sometimes, even if my name was present on the door or on the internet site, I felt like a ghost, a person who would never integrate, but still a slight threat for the others, both disturbing and seductive. To be a guest at people's houses is different and I never liked it too much, perhaps because sleeping over is showing your vulnerability, your pyjamas and your snoring. Depending on the culture and the families, a guest is more or less welcome and in some families the saying goes that they begin to stink after three days (!), which is a really short period, especially if there is enough space in a house for several people to stay, in particular if you compare this short period to descriptions in Russian novels where guests stayed for several months, at least in families who had big estates. In three days, you don't even have the time to understand the host's habits or exchange anything meaningful with her, and if you are a ghost, you cannot accomplish anything.

Who is the Other for organisations? Even if it is an ideal, we must try to imagine them. It could be a totally crazy consultant, a left-wing academic or a religious leader.

Imagine if a Hare Krishna woman, dressed in orange robes, all of a sudden decided to visit your organisation. What would you do? How would you speak? If this dancing orange being opens the door to your office while you are sitting trying to write an academic paper, what do you say? Do you offer her a cup of tea? Do you bring her to the 3 o'clock meeting? Do you ask her for her life story? Most probably you will just ask what she is looking for and try to lead her out of the building, more or less gently depending on your mood. But what if things develop like in Pasolini's film, what if you fall in love with her? What if she dances elegantly and even your colleagues want to follow her?

Again, this is fiction, but there are surely crazy stories out there in small and big organisations, that people like to tell and retell each other. There are these moments of total disorganisation that can redefine human relations, like when an artist is doing a performance in a corporate context or perhaps when a coworkers' sickness is unveiled. Sometimes it is the client, or the ideal client, who plays the role of stimulating Other (Anderson-Gough et. al., 2000). Some would say that the Other is the reason of organising. The military, for example, are organised around the idea of the Other: what are soldiers doing if not waiting for the enemy, the barbarian who wants to destroy our civilisation?

The three aspects we sketched out for the Other are closely related. They are a disturbing person, sometimes asking awkward questions and sometimes just disturbing with their different presence, with an intensity in their being that cannot go unnoticed. Linked to that is their sexual power: they are not afraid of sexuality and sexual encounters, but at the same time they do not make a great fuss of it: it is part of life, that's all. The visitor in Pasolini's film has sex with the mother, but unlike her, it does not seem to affect him too much. They are a travelling person, meaning they feel at home everywhere and nowhere, and this is perhaps what links them most to the ghost. Perhaps the Other does not know exactly who they are, and this could be a result of their deconstruction process: they are a person escaping from their own subjectivity, which is frightening for all people trying to make sense of life in more superficial ways, simply making money or having a career for example. Organisational life cannot face the Other, and this is mostly linked to their sexual power, but in situations where bodies are open and benevolent, we could at least try to approach them and ask them about their name.

The organisations we mentioned or analysed in this paper are many: the church, the army, universities, an investment bank, a film production company, and families, which were approached through fiction. These

organisations are impossible to compare but they are all the outcome of an organisational process aiming at some kind of efficiency. In these contexts, the Other and others are surely disturbing. Still, for ethical relations to occur, it is our belief that we should be more open to guests and ghosts, strangers and different bodies who are able to bring change to our organisations. Given the closure of most organisations nowadays, guests should not wait for an invitation, rather they should just pop up and dare to stay for longer periods. If we are ready to listen to them and let them act at the margin of our organisations, they will surely bring some kind of truth, which will redefine human relations. The guest's body is not fully present, as it could leave at any time, and it is certainly not generous. Rather it is dubious and trembling, attracting others to play outside and experiment with their lives. Hospitality and openness to guests should be considered as a core value not only for families, but also for organisations. Regarding hospitality in general, given that in the end we are all guests on this earth, private property and its boundaries should always remain relative, which would naturally let in guests and ghosts.

Coda about ghosts

Derrida is also known for his hauntology and was part of an intriguing film in black and white (*Ghost Dance*, Ken McMullen, 1983) where he plays himself and states that ghosts also appear through our technologies, phone and fax for example. In the film we see him answering the phone and commenting about the fact that ghosts also exist and travel through our technologies, which is also touched upon in a special issue about ghosts in organisations (Hunter & Baxter, 2021). With the presence of ghosts, homes and organisations sometimes become unfamiliar: this is due to haunting and the fact that repressed violence sometimes emerges. A ghost can be both benevolent, helping you to take an important decision and evil, someone killed coming back to take revenge for example. Ghosts can suddenly teleport you to the past as they reconfigure time. Unlike guests they are supernatural creatures, outsiders linking us to other worlds.

The ghost exists at the boundary of worlds and is linked to death. Scholars have shown how consciousness of our own death is linked to the practise of ethics: "we believe that facing up to death may paradoxically free us from unthinking obedience to norms and enable us to seek more fulfilling forms of work and relations within organisations" (Reedy & Learmonth, 2011). They propose a redirection of ethics in response to an awareness of death, and this is perhaps what guests and their following ghosts, showing us the frailty of life and organisational life, can help us to do, provided we are ready to listen to them.

The absolute Other could also be death, this phenomenon that we will never fully understand but that makes us fully human. Death is the Other you are always escaping and ignoring, like a black hole of emptiness and darkness, like melancholia itself. Death is also a liberation and just feeling it, like some ghost relating to you, can make you feel more alive. It is when we relate to and resist death and ghosts that we are truly alive, intensively embodied and hence open for ethical questioning.

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Understanding ‘good vibe’ atmospheres in coworking spaces

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Purpose: This paper explores what is meant by a ‘good vibe’ atmosphere, an area of significant importance identified in previous studies on user preferences in coworking spaces and an aspect that can determine the success or failure of a place.

Methodology: An online survey was used to collect the responses of 148 coworkers across Europe and the Middle East on 28 variables measuring the importance of social and material elements that shape a ‘good vibe’ atmosphere (Cronbach alpha coefficient 0.879). Analysis was undertaken using principal component analysis and multiple regression.

Findings: ‘Good vibe’ atmospheres are sensed at two distinct levels: an explicit, conscious appreciation of primarily material elements and a deeper, implicit understanding centred on the social purpose of coworking. At the explicit level, survey participants rated material elements such as natural light, communal areas and a variety of workspaces as the most important contributors to a ‘good vibe’. At the implicit level, regression analysis showed that the Social community component was at the atmospheric core, including elements such as having a sense of community, conversations, or social and work-related events. Material elements and strategies that create the component Communal spaces, including spaces for non-work activities or connections to nature, also made a significant contribution to a ‘good vibe’ atmosphere. These elements and strategies require curation and an active contribution from both providers and users.

Originality: This paper contributes a conceptual model of ‘good vibe’ atmospheres in coworking spaces. It extends the sociomateriality perspective that suggests complete things and their entanglements by adding an atmospheric lens to consider the ‘in-between’ and ‘no-things’ that are neither fully material nor purely subjective. The outcome is a more comprehensive understanding of this everyday sense-making.

Practical implications: The importance of both material and social elements to users is presented alongside recommendations to support the curation of ‘good vibe’ atmospheres in shared working locations.

Keywords: atmospheres; coworking spaces; vibe; sociomateriality

Introduction

“I went in and... it was a ghost town. There was maybe two dozen people in there. Where last time I went, there was 400 people, and it was a massive buzz and people were talking around the coffee bar and playing ping pong... Now it's... two dozen people all sat in their quiet corners not engaging with each other. I think the buzz of coworking has kind of gone.” (UK coworker, 2022)

This quote was collected shortly after the reopening of coworking spaces (CWS) following the Covid-19 pandemic and shows specific user expectations for these locations which were not being met.

CWS are defined as shared working spaces used by location-independent unaffiliated knowledge workers (Rådman *et al.*, 2023; Orel and Bennis, 2021) that provide opportunities for knowledge exchange and a working community (Weijjs-Perrée *et al.*, 2019). Previous research on CWS user preferences and expectations has identified a ‘vibrant and creative atmosphere’ (Appel-Meulenbroek *et al.*, 2021), ‘good groove’ or ‘productive buzz’ (Endrissat and Leclercq-Vandelannoitte, 2021) as a key requirement. Apart from a few qualitative studies (Bernhardt, 2023; Orel and Alonso Almeida, 2019; Waters-Lynch and Duff, 2021), no quantitative research has yet dissected this specific elusive atmosphere.

In examining the above quote, the ‘buzz’ is created through the presence of others, sounds of conversations, availability of coffee bars, play equipment and being near others. CWS are attempting to reinvigorate their offer since the pandemic to rekindle the ‘buzz’ as this can often determine the success or failure of a place in stimulating repeat usage and sharing experiences with others. Strategies being used by CWS include adding meeting rooms, private offices and flexible desks in open workspaces, alongside services such as gyms, greenhouses and pet amenities (Deskmag, 2023). However, it is unclear whether these strategies will create the atmosphere so desired by CWS users.

In this research, we unpack what coworkers mean by the felt, situated and often difficult to articulate ‘good vibe’ through examining the importance they assign to different aspects of the CWS offer in contributing to this type of atmosphere. We situate the research in the literature of spatial atmospheres and build upon the work of Böhme (1993) and Bernhardt (2023) to develop a conceptual model that considers CWS in their

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construction, incorporating ‘perceived objects’: material elements (e.g. communal areas and background music); social elements (e.g. other coworkers, community hosts); and curated strategies (e.g. social events, open plan design); alongside coworkers as ‘constructors of space’, ‘perceiving subjects’ and as co-creators of atmospheres.

We adopt a sociomateriality lens (Orlikowski and Scott, 2008) to explore the relationality between these social and material elements and strategies, taking into consideration human understanding that includes emotions, values and experience as well as symbolic and cultural viewpoints, to examine the importance assigned. By combining the sociomateriality lens, which suggests fullness, complete things and their entanglements, alongside an atmospheric lens, that addresses the ungraspable, undiscernible ‘in-between’, we develop a nuanced understanding of this relational phenomenon but with practical implications.

We present the results of a survey completed between 2022-2023 with a sample of 148 coworkers across Europe and the Middle East, which contributes to the largely qualitative body of research. The importance that coworkers assigned to various social and material features are examined using the sociomateriality and atmospheric lens to provide an understanding of strategies used to create the ‘good vibe’. We use principal component analysis and multiple regression analysis to examine the underlying relationships between material and social features and the extent to which they predict the ‘good vibe’. Alongside this we consider demographics in our analysis to establish the influence of the sociocultural context on ‘good vibe’ ratings supporting a sociomateriality lens.

The paper will firstly examine the concept of atmospheres and its construction in CWS, before moving on to consider sociomateriality and its application to CWS. This is summarised in a conceptual model to bring together our exploration of the ‘good vibe’ concept. Following this, we present the methodology, and results which are discussed using a combined sociomateriality and atmospheric lens to highlight the elements that are explicitly important to coworkers and the underlying relational phenomena that emerges as a ‘good vibe’ atmosphere. We then present recommendations for making practical use of the findings in CWS, and future research.

Our exploratory research is structured around addressing the research question: How do material and social features contribute towards creating a ‘good vibe’ in CWS?

Conceptualising the ‘vibe’: atmospheres and coworking

In everyday language, and also when talking to coworkers, the term ‘vibe’ is used interchangeably with other expressions such as atmosphere, but also mood, buzz, ambiance, or groove (Endrissat and Leclercq-Vandelannoitte, 2021), yet these terms should not be treated as conceptually equivalent. We understand ‘vibe’ as an emic and vernacular expression through which coworkers name a felt, situated and often difficult-to-articulate quality of a CWS. ‘Atmosphere’, by contrast, is the analytical concept through which we theorise this quality as constituted by perceiving subjects and the perceived space, including bodies, material arrangements, spatial settings, sensory cues and social practices (Böhme, 1993; Anderson, 2009; Griffero, 2016). We therefore use ‘good vibe’ as the empirical entry point into coworkers’ everyday sense-making, while using ‘atmosphere’ to analyse how such felt qualities are constituted and experienced.

Research has considered spatial atmospheres or the affective dimension of spaces in what ‘hits us’ when entering a room and how the space makes us feel (Beyes and Holt, 2020). The atmosphere of a place can be seen as the perceived outward effect of social and material elements in their spatial arrangement (Löw, 2016).

Böhme (1993, p. 114) proposed that atmosphere is “the peculiar intermediary status ... between subject and object”. The atmosphere is what happens ‘in-between’ the perceiving subjects and the perceived objects; they express the relationship of states of mind and environmental, social and material qualities (Böhme, 1993). With this understanding, Böhme attributes a certain quasi-objectivity to atmospheres - although atmospheres are perceived subjectively, they are intersubjectively experiential.

Against this theoretical understanding, Bernhardt (2023) discusses the atmospheres of CWS as the ‘in-between’ of the (perceived) space which is composed through material features such as large desks or communal areas, and the social elements such as other coworkers or community hosts. The (perceiving) subjects are the CWS users, who experience the space and construct an understanding of the objects. Atmospheres are constituted by both the perceiving subject (here CWS users) and the perceived object (social and material aspects of CWS) and not as something third between subject and object (Böhme, 1993).

Building on this understanding of CWS atmospheres, we connect our study to the broader literature of Management and Organisation Studies (MOS) on atmosphere and organising. Beyond philosophical and

sociological discussions of atmosphere, MOS increasingly conceptualise atmospheres as constitutive elements of organising rather than as passive backgrounds. Atmospheres are theorised as ‘quasi-things’ (Griffero, 2017) or ‘half-things’ (Schmitz, 2014), in line with the understanding outlined above: they are neither physical objects nor mere subjective feelings, but in-between forces that shape organisational life (Jørgensen and Beyes, 2023). Atmospheres are further understood as relational phenomena that emerge through ongoing relations among bodies, material arrangements, spatial settings, aesthetic practices and everyday ways of working (Jørgensen, 2019). Technology also shapes the organisational atmosphere, as it can be especially seen in CWS (Endrissat and Leclercq-Vandelannoitte, 2021).

The actual experience of space is also pre-structured by the manipulation of sensory stimuli (Illouz, 2017) where the spatial objects are consciously pre-arranged to achieve a perceived outward effect. This is done through staging work (Löw, 2016) or aesthetic work (Böhme, 1993) where the social and material elements are arranged or curated to evoke specific ‘vibes’ by the coworking hosts (Bernhardt, 2023). An interesting example in the context of collaborative spaces is the case of a silent atmosphere that is not only produced through the absence of noise, but also desks and chairs are arranged, so that the coworkers can’t see each other, there are white walls and no disturbing decoration, or there is a sign at the closed door, that says it’s the silent space (Bernhardt, 2023). This pre-arrangement leads to silence-supporting activities by the coworkers including body postures focused on the screen, preventing eye contact, or wearing headphones (de Vaujany *et al.*, 2019).

MOS literature also commonly distinguishes analytically between the staging or production of atmospheres on the one hand, and their reception or sensing on the other (Jørgensen, 2019). This distinction is useful for our study, which examines the ‘good vibe’ from the perspective of coworkers as perceiving subjects while also considering the social and material strategies through which coworking hosts seek to curate it. For this research, we are building upon the work of Bernhardt (2023) who has discussed curating atmospheres, by focusing on the creation specifically of a ‘good vibe’ atmosphere.

Sociomaterial perspective

The sociomateriality perspective argues that there is an entangled relationality between the social and material. They are not independent entities; one does not exist without the other. Social and material are constitutively entangled in practice (Orlikowski and Scott, 2008) and human activity cannot be separated from settings, technologies and material objects. Instead, there is an

intra-action and overlapping (Fenwick *et al.*, 2011) that emerges in practice. This perspective suggests an ontology of fullness, of complete things and their entanglements. However, an atmospheric lens suggests the ‘in-between’, the ungraspable, the indiscernible, and the unknowable — non-events and no-things that still carry significance (see de Vaujany, 2025; Giovannoni and Quattrone, 2025; Jørgensen and Beyes, 2023). This leans into Whitehead’s (1968) ‘culture of possibilities’ where reality is not a set of fixed facts and what is given, it is instead an ongoing process defined also by what might have been and might yet be. For example, a view from the window is not a thing in any strict material sense, but it can open the way to non-events, half-things and no-things - possibilities perceived as such. Being seated next to a window makes it possible not to rely on artificial light, not to feel entirely alone, not to feel completely disconnected from the breath of the city, as much as it enables other things to unfold.

This research therefore extends sociomateriality to consider the ‘in between’, ‘half-things’ that are neither fully material nor purely subjective, as well as the no-things - possibilities that carry significance in creating the ‘in-between’ that is atmosphere.

With the sociomateriality perspective, there are certain affordances of material objects (Latour, 2005) in what the object invites or can do. For example, the physical properties of a chair can be made up of the material fabric, size and density and can be used to sit, but affordances go beyond simply the action that is possible with the object. According to Symon and Pritchard (2015, p.244) “the capacity for action comes from the enmeshing of material affordances, human understanding, situated practices and cultural discourses as a sociomaterial assemblage”. These sociocultural interpretations of the material bring in emotions, values and experience. In the case of the chair it can be used for seating, but other social understandings can be around its ergonomic design for a more comfortable working experience; a professional stature from a formal seating position; wheels suggest movement; lower seating can invite relaxation. The half-things and no-things possibilities of an ‘office’ chair could include a professional mindset to complete work, a grounded working experience, or concerns for back pain and a source of distraction impacting on the task at hand.

In adopting the sociomaterial lens, we consider the perspectives of CWS users as the perceiving subjects, who are sensing the material and the intangible social elements included in CWS in their construction. Users are not simply passive observers of the material and social elements. Rather, the elements are sensed in their entirety

using sociocultural interpretations along with ‘half-things’ and ‘no-things’ possibilities, which in turn shapes the perceived atmosphere. This entanglement and enmeshing of the subject with the object and non-object, is what can be captured through exploring the sociomaterial assemblages of CWS using an atmospheric lens.

Coworking spaces in their construction

CWS users as perceiving subjects comprise of independent knowledge workers and freelancers (Mitev *et al.*, 2019); entrepreneurs and start-ups (Bouncken *et al.*, 2021); and increasingly employees of firms (Aumüller-Wagner and Baka, 2023). Different types of CWS have been identified to support this range of users, which according to the taxonomy developed by Orel and Bennis (2021) comprises: individual-purposed spaces focused on freelancers and independent professionals; creation-purposed spaces such as makerspaces; group-purposed spaces for teams often used by larger firms; and startup-purposed spaces akin to business incubators. Despite the variation, all align to an extent with the core values of coworking (openness, collaboration, sustainability, accessibility, and community; Coworking.com, n.d.) and are designed as shared working spaces.

In considering CWS in their construction, several authors have examined user needs and preferences (c.f. Rådman *et al.*, 2023; Appel-Meulenbroek *et al.*, 2021; Weijs-Perrée *et al.*, 2019) and find key requirements to be location, contract options, networking opportunities, community and a vibrant atmosphere. Our research develops this broader view of CWS by specifically examining the characteristics that comprise the vibrant or ‘good vibe’ atmosphere that is so important for encouraging repeat usage - vital to CWS continued operation.

Adopting the sociomateriality lens, the material elements of CWS can be understood to be complete physical entities such as furniture e.g. large tables, desk chairs, standup workbenches (Bouncken *et al.*, 2021); technology, digital tools, and hardware such as printers and screens (Endrissat and Leclercq-Vandelannoitte, 2021). These elements are relational to create a material strategy that aims to be affectively perceived as a specific aesthetic or narrative and can include the spatial layout e.g. size, open plan design, meeting rooms, refreshment areas; and how they are designed e.g. décor, lighting, planting and natural lighting (Bouncken *et al.*, 2021). A sociocultural understanding of this CWS materiality brings in coworkers as constructors and perceivers of spaces who interpret the possibilities which have been examined to some extent by others. The material strategy of using an open-plan spatial layout is common in CWS (Orel and Bennis, 2021; Bouncken and Aslam, 2023) as this aims to create a sense of transparency and openness (Turco, 2016)

and supports the facilitation and possibilities of encounters through visibility (Shortt, 2018). However, open-plan layouts can also produce impressions of control, through lack of privacy, distractions and constant visibility creating feelings of power and intimidation (Baldry and Barnes, 2012).

In sensing the atmosphere in its entirety, the curation of the CWS soundscape is a further material strategy. This can include speech noise, footsteps, phones ringing and often unwanted sounds due to their unpredictable duration which can lead to the possibility of distraction and reduced concentration (Orel and Alonso Almeida, 2019). To help reduce this possibility, some CWS take control of their soundscape and play music or natural sounds such as birdsong or water. Orel and Alonso Almeida (2019) found that background music in CWS helped to tackle distractions that can appear in open plan work environments by masking social noise and giving people the confidence to have conversations without fear of distracting others.

Social elements in CWS bring in the interpretations and understandings of discernible actions and activities, and can include the presence of other users (regular or new), having planned and unplanned conversations and are one of the key motivations for using CWS (Rådman *et al.*, 2023; Weijs-Perrée *et al.*, 2019). Social strategies are the curation of social elements through the aesthetic work of the coworking host. This includes giving tours, running social events, such as breakfast clubs or quiz nights; work-related events, such as training, users sharing project work or external business speakers (de Vaujany *et al.*, 2019).

The sociocultural interpretation of these CWS social elements and strategies has been previously examined. Blagoev *et al.*, (2019) found coworkers gained a sense of informality from participating in events leading them to share knowledge and ideas and creating a sense of self-control, choice and individual power. They also found that co-locating developed a sense of ‘co-discipline’ through comparing productivity and is a view supported by others (Perriton, 2023; Bernhardt, 2023). This aligns with the concept of ‘relational energy’ identified by Owens *et al.*, (2016) where individuals can be energised by others through a shared experience that can heighten emotions and influence behaviour such as working harder or complete demotivation.

Several authors have also considered the sociocultural interpretation of having a sense of community in CWS, that arises from being co-present, co-located and the inevitable opportunities for social interactions,

knowledge sharing and collaboration (Waters-Lynch and Duff, 2021; Parrino, 2015; Merkel, 2015). The immaterial labour undertaken by coworkers is described as ‘affective commoning’ by Waters-Lynch and Duff (2021) to depict the personal and professional relational contributions of coworkers; Blagoev *et al.* (2019) discussed the sense of shared commitment; and Garrett *et al.* (2017) found this to create a sense of belonging, mutual care, identity and support. This affective relationality builds an intangible, ungraspable socially constructed collective without which there can be feelings of isolation and unproductivity.

Conceptual Framework

In this research we aim to disentangle the highly complex situated practice of atmospheres in CWS through a quantitative survey design. We specifically focus on an atmosphere that is perceived as a ‘good vibe’ which is identified as a key user requirement (Weijs-Perrée *et al.*, 2019; Appel-Meulenbroek *et al.*, 2021) and leads users to dwell in the space, work well and build a sense of belonging (Bernhardt, 2023). Considering the above and following the work of Bernhardt (2023), the ‘vibe’ in CWS can be examined from different angles. It can be focussed on exploring the ‘perceived object’ - how the social and material are arranged in the context of staging or aesthetic work undertaken by coworking hosts to create certain vibes; alternatively from the view of the ‘perceiving subject’ and how the social and material is experienced by coworkers as constructors of space. This is depicted visually in Figure 1 which presents the conceptual framework of this paper. We focus on the perceiving subject - coworkers as constructors of spaces, their everyday sense-making and sociocultural understanding of perceived social and material elements and strategies for creating the ‘in-between’ empirical entry point of a ‘good vibe’.

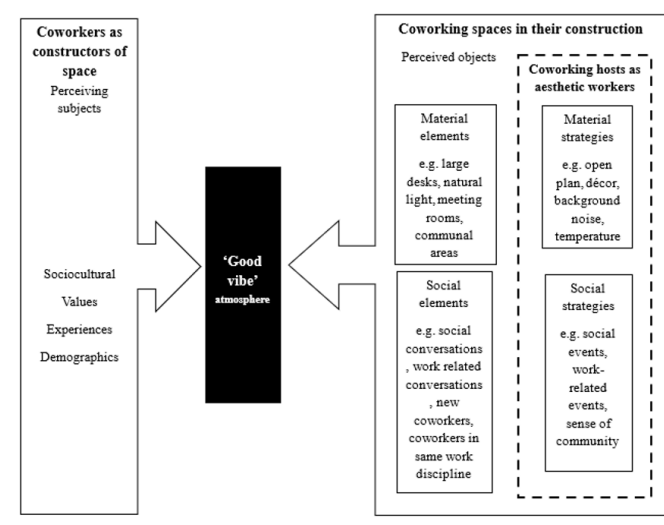


Figure 1. ‘Good vibe’ conceptual framework
(Source: Authors’ own work)

Methodology

The study uses a quantitative methodology to address the dearth of data of this nature on atmospheres. Through a survey, we can remove ourselves as researchers from the context and collect more objective data on a topic we recognise as being subjective. In adopting this approach, we can also gather views from a much larger sample that can support a more reliable and generalisable measure.

Following ethical approval, a questionnaire was designed to encapsulate the conceptual framework. A 5-point Likert scale was used to collect views on the importance of various elements and strategies in their contribution to creating a ‘good vibe’, ranging from 1 for ‘Not important at all’ to 5 for ‘Very important’. The conceptual framework defined through the literature was used to guide the questionnaire design to measure ‘CWS in their construction’ (see Table 1). 13 items were included on ‘social elements’ such as conversations with new people, and ‘social strategies’ such as having a sense of community. 15 items were included on ‘material elements’ such as availability of individual desks, and ‘material strategies’ curated by the coworking host such as open plan layout. A question used as the dependent variable was included to ascertain the overall importance of having a ‘good vibe’ in CWS. The instrument yielded a Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient of 0.879, which meets the acceptable threshold of between 0.6 and 0.9 (Wallen and Fraenkel, 2013). Demographic data was gathered to understand the perceiving subjects or ‘constructors of space’ and ascertain the influence of age, gender, geographic location, employment type and CWS usage.

Variable	Supporting CWS literature
Material elements	
Availability of different types of working spaces (e.g. desks, breakfast bar, comfy seating, tall seating)	Bouncken <i>et al.</i> , 2020; Appel-Meulenbroek <i>et al.</i> 2021; Weijs-Perrée <i>et al.</i> , 2019.
Availability of large desks for more people to work at	Bouncken <i>et al.</i> , 2020; Orel and Alonso Almeida, 2019; Weijs-Perrée <i>et al.</i> , 2019.
Availability of individual desks	Bouncken <i>et al.</i> , 2020; Orel and Alonso Almeida, 2019; Weijs-Perrée <i>et al.</i> , 2019.
Communal areas e.g. kitchens, coffee areas	Bouncken <i>et al.</i> , 2020; Appel-Meulenbroek <i>et al.</i> , 2021; Weijs-Perrée <i>et al.</i> , 2019.
Spaces focused on non-work activities e.g. gym, yoga, bar	Cabral and van Winden 2020; Weijs-Perrée <i>et al.</i> , 2019.
Availability of technical equipment and support e.g. printers, scanners, photocopiers, Wifi	Bouncken <i>et al.</i> , 2020; Endrissat and Leclercq-Vandelannoitte, 2021
Digital channel for the coworking space (e.g. blog, online community, Slack channel)	Bouncken <i>et al.</i> , 2020; Endrissat and Leclercq-Vandelannoitte, 2021

Material strategies	
Open plan design of space	Bouncken <i>et al.</i> , 2020; Orel and Bennis, 2021; Bouncken and Aslam, 2021; Appel-Meulenbroek <i>et al.</i> , 2021; Jackonen <i>et al.</i> , 2017
Availability of meeting rooms	Bouncken <i>et al.</i> , 2020; Deskmag, 2022
Background noise	Orel and Alonso Almeida, 2019
Background music	Orel and Alonso Almeida, 2019
Natural light	Suharjanto <i>et al.</i> , 2020; Orel and Alonso Almeida, 2019
Connections to nature (e.g. planting, water)	Suharjanto <i>et al.</i> , 2020; Orel and Alonso Almeida, 2019
Temperature	Orel and Alonso Almeida, 2019
Updated bulletin boards/ ideas board	Bouncken <i>et al.</i> , 2020; Endrissat and Leclercq-Vandelannoitte, 2021
Social elements	
Being able to have social conversations	Blagoev <i>et al.</i> , 2019; Appel-Meulenbroek <i>et al.</i> , 2021; Rådman <i>et al.</i> , 2023
Regular conversations with the same coworkers	Rådman <i>et al.</i> 2023
Conversations with new people	Orel and Alonso Almeida, 2019
Conversations with people working on similar projects to you	Appel-Meulenbroek <i>et al.</i> , 2021
Conversations with people working on different projects to you	Appel-Meulenbroek <i>et al.</i> , 2021; Parrino, 2015;
Conversations with the coworking space/ community manager	Merkel, 2015; de Vaujany <i>et al.</i> , 2019
Having unplanned conversations with people	Parrino, 2015; Merkel, 2015
Sharing work-related knowledge and experiences	Merkel, 2015; de Vaujany <i>et al.</i> , 2019
A regular flow of new people	Orel and Alonso Almeida, 2019
Relationships with coworkers you can trust	Rådman <i>et al.</i> , 2023; Orel and Alonso Almeida, 2019
Social strategies	
Availability of work-related events (e.g. training, business speakers)	Appel-Meulenbroek <i>et al.</i> 2021
Availability of social events	Bouncken <i>et al.</i> , 2020; Blagoev <i>et al.</i> , 2019; Appel-Meulenbroek <i>et al.</i> , 2021
Having a sense of community	Bouncken <i>et al.</i> , 2020; Appel-Meulenbroek <i>et al.</i> , 2021; Rådman <i>et al.</i> , 2023; Parrino, 2015; Merkel, 2015

Table 1. Research variables
(Source: Authors' own work)

The survey was conducted online and was distributed via social media and through CWS community hosts providing access to their members. Due to research being conducted in different regions in Europe and the Middle East, the survey was provided in English, German and Farsi. Data collection was conducted between June 2022 - May 2023, at which point 238 responses were collected.

Following data cleansing a sample of 148 responses remained.

Descriptive statistics were used to establish the importance of the 28 independent variables on social and material elements/ strategies in contributing to a 'good vibe'. To show the degree of difference between the various elements of CWS atmospheres, principal components analysis was used to extract the loadings where Kaiser criterion had Eigenvalues >1. To improve interpretability, varimax rotation was applied (Kaiser, 1958) to maximise the variance shared among the items while remaining uncorrelated. A factor loading threshold of 0.40 was used to determine meaningful relationships. Following this, the principal component factors were used as variables for multiple regression. This analysis was used to determine the relationship between the principal components as the independent predictor variables and the dependent variable of overall importance of 'good vibe' atmospheres. Regression assumptions were assessed including independence of errors (Durbin-Watson statistic) and multicollinearity (VIF < 10; tolerance >1). Robustness of the findings, and sociocultural influences, were examined through the use of demographic control variables to check the observed results. Dummy variables were created for gender (male vs. female), age (18-34 yrs vs. more than 35 yrs), employment type (entrepreneur vs. corporate), location (Western regions vs. non-Western regions) and use of CWS per week (1-2 days vs. 3-7 days) to assess for their influence on the interpretations of CWS atmospheres. The use of controls allows a true understanding of CWS atmospheres independent of demographics to establish universality (Carlson and Wu, 2012).

Results

Table 2 outlines the profile of participants and shows the most common age was 25-34 years (33.8%) with slightly more female respondents (54.7%) than males (43.2%). The largest proportion were from the UK (48.6%) and tended to be employed by a larger company (11 or more employees) (52.7%). In terms of time spent using CWS during the week, there was an even distribution, showing a good spread of experience.

Overall (N=148)		Description	
Share %	Frequency	Categories	Characteristics
6.8	10	18-24	Age
33.8	50	25- 34	
27.7	41	35-44	
18.9	28	45-54	

10.8	16	55-64	Gender
1.4	2	65	
0.7	1	Unknown	
43.2	64	Male	
54.7	81	Female	Country
0.7	1	Non-binary / third gender	
1.4	2	Unknown	
48.6	72	UK	
6.1	9	Iran	Employment status
27.0	40	Germany	
2.0	3	Switzerland	
2.7	4	USA	
1.4	2	Spain	Country
2.0	3	Italy	
4.2	6	Other	
6.1	9	Unknown	
16.2	24	Self-employed/ Freelancer	Employment status
15.5	23	Entrepreneur	
15.5	23	Employee of company (2-10 employees)	

Table 2. Profile of participants
(Source: Authors' own work)

Table 3 shows the respondents' mean importance scores for the social and material variables. Generally, the highest mean importance score was assigned to material elements including natural light (mean = 4.19), communal areas (mean = 4.12) and availability of technical equipment (mean = 4.11). Background music (mean = 2.24) and background noise (mean = 2.59) had the most minor importance in contributing towards creating a 'good vibe'. The mean importance score of having a 'good vibe' in a CWS (mean = 3.94) demonstrates the positive regard that respondents allocated to finding the 'right' atmosphere.

Description	n	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean Difference	t-value	Sig. (2-tailed) a
Natural light	141	4.19	0.89	1.19	15.97	0.00
Communal areas e.g. kitchens, coffee areas	141	4.12	0.91	1.12	14.68	0.00

Availability of technical equipment and support e.g. printers, scanners, photocopiers, Wi-Fi	141	4.11	0.97	1.11	13.56	0.00
Temperature	139	4.06	0.79	1.06	15.84	0.00
Availability of meeting rooms	141	4.04	0.92	1.04	13.50	0.00
Availability of different types of working spaces (e.g. desks, breakfast bar, comfy seating, tall seating)	141	3.88	0.93	0.88	11.23	0.00
Availability of individual desks	140	3.83	0.97	0.83	10.14	0.00
Being able to have social conversations	150	3.81	0.93	0.81	10.60	0.00
Having a sense of community	148	3.80	1.03	0.80	9.42	0.00
Relationships with coworkers you can trust	147	3.74	1.09	0.74	8.23	0.00
Connections to nature (e.g. planting, water)	141	3.70	1.00	0.70	8.26	0.00
Sharing work-related knowledge and experiences	148	3.57	1.08	0.57	6.41	0.00
Conversations with people working on similar projects	148	3.54	1.11	0.54	5.93	0.00
Regular conversations with the same coworkers	150	3.50	0.94	0.50	6.52	0.00
Having unplanned conversations with people	147	3.45	1.10	0.45	4.95	0.00
Open plan design of space	141	3.38	0.99	0.38	4.51	0.00
Availability of large desks for more people to work at	140	3.34	1.13	0.34	3.59	0.00
Conversations with new people	149	3.28	1.03	0.28	3.35	0.00

Conversations with the coworking space/ community manager	147	3.19	1.18	0.19	1.95	0.05
Conversations with people working on different projects	148	3.16	1.02	0.16	1.86	0.06
Digital channel for the coworking space (e.g. blog, online community, Slack channel)	140	3.16	1.17	0.16	1.60	0.11
Availability of social events	148	3.03	1.18	0.03	0.35	0.73
Availability of work-related events (e.g. training, business speakers)	147	3.00	1.17	0.00	0.00	1.00
Updated bulletin boards/ ideas board	140	2.95	1.11	-0.05	-0.53	0.59
Spaces focussed on non-work activities e.g. gym, yoga, bar	140	2.84	1.15	-0.16	-1.69	0.09
A regular flow of new people	148	2.62	1.07	-0.38	-4.30	0.00
Background noise	141	2.59	1.24	-0.41	-3.95	0.00
Background music	139	2.24	1.23	-0.76	-7.26	0.00
a. One-sample t-test with test value=3 **p < 0.01 (2-tailed)						

Table 3. Mean importance (independent variables)
(Source: Authors' own work)

In the principal components analysis with varimax rotation, sampling adequacy was confirmed by the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure (KMO = 0.79) and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was significant, $\chi^2(378) = 1528.010$, $p < .001$, indicating suitability for factor analysis (Field, 2022). The analysis identified six components (Table 4) that explained 59.17% of total variance which is close to 60% acceptable level (Hair *et al.*, 2019). Component 1 (named Social community) showed strong loadings including having a sense of community (.763), unplanned conversations (.758) and availability of social events (.713). Component 2 (named Communal spaces) captured the material elements including spaces for non-work activities (.650), connections to nature (.626) and different types of working spaces (.602). Component 3 (named Operational support) was defined by high loadings on

meeting rooms (.753), technical equipment support (.701) and updated bulletin boards (.562). Component 4 (named Trusted relationships) captured conversations with people on similar projects (.689), relationships with trusted coworkers (.622) and regular conversations with the same coworkers (.566). Component 5 (named Physical comfort) showed strong loadings with natural light (.733), temperature (.695) and availability of individual desks (.550). Finally, component 6 (named Soundscape) captured background music (.767) and background noise (.712).

Internal consistency was evaluated for each component prior to entering them into the multiple regression analysis. Cronbach alpha indicated variable but acceptable reliability across the components (ranged $\alpha = .555-.891$). Component 1 showed excellent reliability ($\alpha = .891$) and Components 2–4 were acceptable for research purposes ($\alpha = .691-.700$). Although Components 5 and 6 ($\alpha = .555-.611$) fell below the .60 threshold, their retention was considered appropriate for exploratory analysis given the small number of items within each factor (DeVellis, 2017). These component scores were retained for regression analysis with the limitations of lower reliability acknowledged.

	Component					
	1 "Social Community"	2 "Comm unal Spaces"	3 "Oper ational Support"	4 "Tru sted Rela tions hips"	5 "Phy sical Com fort"	6 "Sou ndsc ape"
Having a sense of community	.763	.203	.041	.132	-.066	-.007
Having unplanned conversations with people	.758	-.035	-.211	.137	.112	.093
Availability of social events	.713	.326	.168	-.047	-.084	-.075
Conversations with the coworking space/ community manager	.711	-.115	.195	.071	-.044	.061
Conversations with new people	.667	.072	-.106	.323	.025	.154
Being able to have social conversations	.665	.201	.010	.276	-.025	-.207
Availability of work related events (e.g. training, business speakers)	.658	.080	.196	-.143	-.284	.146

A regular flow of new people	.639	.108	-.128	.102	.078	.269
Conversations with people working on different projects to you	.627	.048	.114	.397	-.026	.137
Sharing work-related knowledge and experiences	.532	.008	.266	.457	.160	.059
Spaces focussed on non-work activities e.g. gym, yoga, bar	.060	.650	.247	-.135	-.212	.097
Connections to nature (e.g. planting, water)	.092	.626	-.078	-.076	.406	.185
Availability of different types of working spaces (e.g. desks, breakfast bar, comfy seating, tall seating)	.091	.602	.301	.239	.159	.088
Availability of large desks for more people to work at	-.058	.566	.133	.464	.038	.202
Open plan design of space	.265	.559	-.130	.299	.114	-.019
Communal areas e.g. kitchens, coffee areas	.327	.449	.273	-.215	.176	-.302
Availability of meeting rooms	-.001	.103	.753	.036	.215	-.152
Availability of technical equipment and support e.g. printers, scanners, photocopiers, Wifi	-.043	.070	.701	.158	.170	-.028
Updated bulletin boards/ ideas board	.256	.233	.562	.130	-.187	.431
Digital channel for the coworking space (e.g. blog, online community, Slack channel)	.281	.322	.528	.143	-.260	.229
Conversations with people working on similar projects to you	.142	.153	.236	.689	-.007	.045

Relationships with coworkers you can trust	.382	-.035	.145	.622	-.095	.109
Regular conversations with the same coworkers	.412	.025	-.137	.566	.012	-.092
Natural light	.104	.065	.088	-.162	.733	.046
Temperature	-.231	.236	.068	.280	.695	.088
Availability of individual desks	-.074	-.055	.430	-.002	.550	.141
Background noise	.091	.017	.121	-.010	.159	.767
Background music	.133	.204	-.124	.094	.068	.712
Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.						

Table 4. Rotated Component Matrix
(Source: Authors' own work)

Multiple regression analysis was undertaken using the six components and demographic control variables to predict the perceived importance of having a 'good vibe' in a CWS (Table 5). The overall model was statistically significant, $F(11, 130) = 7.604$, $p < .001$, explaining 39.1% of the variance in importance ratings ($R^2 = .391$, Adjusted $R^2 = .340$) which is considered substantively meaningful (Hair *et al.*, 2019). The Durbin-Watson statistic (1.963) indicated no concerns with autocorrelation. Two components emerged as significant positive predictors: Social community ($\beta = .416$, $p < .001$) and Communal spaces ($\beta = .419$, $p < .001$), suggesting that stronger social connections and better shared-space amenities are associated with a higher importance of a 'good vibe'. Trusted relationships also showed a smaller but still significant effect ($\beta = .159$, $p = .023$). However, Operational support ($\beta = .079$, $p = .255$), Physical comfort ($\beta = .094$, $p = .180$), and Soundscape ($\beta = -.004$, $p = .958$) were not significant predictors. None of the demographic controls (gender, age, coworking space usage, employment type, or location) made a significant contribution to the model (all $ps > .05$) showing no substantial impact on the ratings for 'good vibe' elements, which suggests the measures are universal. Multicollinearity diagnostics indicated no issues, with all VIF values between 1.017 and 1.204 (Hair *et al.*, 2019).

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients				
Model	B	SE	β	t	Sig.	Tolerance	VIF
(Constant)	3.786	.223		16.999	<.001		

Social community	.394	.068	.416	5.794	<.001	.909	1.100
Communal spaces	.394	.067	.419	5.870	<.001	.918	1.090
Operational support	.074	.065	.079	1.143	.255	.983	1.017
Trusted relationships	.150	.065	.159	2.308	.023	.982	1.018
Physical comfort	.089	.066	.094	1.349	.180	.955	1.047
Soundscape	-.003	.066	-.004	-.053	.958	.948	1.055
Gender	-.051	.135	-.027	-.377	.707	.939	1.065
Age	-.043	.139	-.022	-.306	.760	.898	1.113
CWS usage	-.088	.140	-.046	-.633	.528	.868	1.152
Employment type	.119	.153	.058	.779	.437	.830	1.204
Location	.228	.203	.082	1.126	.262	.880	1.136
R = .626, R-squared = .391, Adj. R-squared = 0.340, F Change = 7.604, df1 = 11, df2 = 130, Sig F Change = <.001, Durbin-Watson = 1.963							
a. Dependent Variable: Overall importance of the 'good vibe' in a CWS							

Table 5. Multiple Regression with control variables
(Source: Authors' own work)

Discussion

Using the coworkers' perspective as constructors of spaces, we will now examine the sociomaterial understanding of the prevalent material and social features along with the half-things, no-things and possibilities that could contribute towards creating a 'good vibe' in CWS.

At an explicit conscious level, CWS users primarily rated material elements as most important suggesting that atmospheres are more immediately perceived at a material level by coworkers as 'constructors of space' rather than sensing the space socially, relationally and considering the aesthetic practices (Jørgensen, 2019). Natural light (mean = 4.19) was rated as the most important element and has been considered by others as a key element of spatial design in CWS (Suharjanto *et al.*, 2020; Bouncken *et al.*, 2021) by providing connections to nature, the outside world and a sense of openness. This supports the findings of Bernhardt (2023) who found coworkers' preferred position was close to windows. The 'in-between' atmospheric lens that considers the possibilities and unrealised alternatives (Whitehead, 1968) of this connection to nature would suggest natural light also means not having to rely on artificial light, not feeling entirely alone, and not feeling trapped in undertaking the task at hand.

Communal areas (mean = 4.12), such as kitchens and coffee areas were the next most important contributor at this immediate level and although a material element of CWS in their construction they have a social, relational purpose. In their materiality, communal areas tend to have refreshment equipment (e.g. kettles, fridges, microwaves), breakfast bars, dining tables, high and low seating (Bouncken *et al.*, 2021). Socioculturally, they are interpreted as supporting time to take a break, replenish energy and dwell in the space alongside others, but also in creating the 'in-between' there is the possibility of a conversation, building a connection with a new or old acquaintance, taking your mind away from a work task so this can be approached with a fresh pair of eyes.

Other elements rated as important for creating a 'good vibe' at this explicit level were functional, material elements such as the availability of technical equipment (mean = 4.11), meeting rooms (mean = 4.04), individual desks (mean = 3.83) and different types of workspaces (mean = 3.88) and would suggest that coworkers as constructors of space are interpreting a 'good vibe' atmosphere as one that provides a conducive working experience. The fullness of their working needs are being prioritised, organised and managed and aligns with previous research that have considered CWS user needs and preferences (e.g. Rådman *et al.*, 2023; Weijs-Perrée *et al.*, 2019). Nevertheless, by prioritising these elements, they are also reducing the possibility of having to rely on a single workspace that offers no choice, potentially being unsuitable for taking calls due to disturbing others, includes too many distractions that focused work is impossible, and has inadequate broadband connection which means that emails and online meetings are compromised.

At the explicit, conscious level social elements and strategies make a lower contribution to creating a 'good vibe' (e.g. social events mean = 3.03; and conversations with new people mean = 3.28). However, the deeper, underlying analysis shows that social elements and strategies emerge as the strongest predictors of a 'good vibe' atmosphere through the components of Social community ($\beta = .416$, $p < .001$) - a combination of social elements and social strategies, and Communal spaces ($\beta = .419$, $p < .001$) - a blend of material elements and material strategies

The greatest contributor to Social Community is unsurprisingly having a sense of community ($\lambda = .763$) which is widely understood as being core to coworking arising from being co-present and the collective everyday practices in CWS (e.g. Garrett *et al.*, 2017). As one of the core values of coworking (Coworking.com, n.d), this result emphasises the importance that coworkers place on

being a community member rather than a consumer of a service (Bernhardt, 2023), of having affective relationality, mutual care, identity and a sense of belonging (Garrett *et al.*, 2017). By acting as community members this will also in turn reconstruct the atmosphere (Bernhardt, 2023), one that is perceived as a 'good vibe' and without this sense of community, coworkers would simply be a buyer of a service, partaking in a transactional relationship with an office space provider, working alone with little interaction outside of their (potentially online) colleagues.

Creating the sense of community is a social strategy curated by community hosts in their aesthetic work (Böhme, 1993). Other strategies include social events ($\lambda = .713$) and work related events ($\lambda = .658$) that socioculturally provide opportunities for coworkers to gain a sense of informality, choice and individual power (Blagoev *et al.*, 2019) through social interaction, knowledge sharing and collaboration (Parrino, 2015). Events are important in facilitating interactions in CWS, bringing together members around particular topics for work-related events, or occasions for social events (Aslam *et al.*, 2021). They support a collective experience and affective relationality (Jørgensen, 2019; de Vaujany, 2025); provide spatial and temporal rhythms to everyday organising (Feldman and Worline, 2016) as well as a source of variation in the work experience. In valuing the possibilities of events, the unrealised alternatives should also be considered in understanding the 'in-between' such as a monotony of tasks solely focussed on one's work, strained interactions with no common focus and little opportunity to step back from the 'day-job' to consider alternative approaches.

Talking to coworkers or facilitating introductions are part of the curatorial practice of coworking hosts (Merkel, 2015). In this context, CWS can be described as serendipity accelerators (Orel and Alonso Almeida, 2019), designed to increase the likelihood of encounters and social interactions (Bernhardt, 2023; Jakonen *et al.*, 2017; Merkel, 2015). The desire to interact or socialise with other coworkers is an important reason that brings many coworkers to work in CWS (Spinuzzi, 2012). Through conversations, encounters are translated into meaningful social interactions, like informal interactions, direct social support (exchanging information, instrumental support) or collaboration (Gerdenitsch *et al.*, 2016). Conversations - whether planned ($\lambda = .627$) or unplanned ($\lambda = .758$), with other coworkers or with the community manager ($\lambda = .711$) - are core elements of the component Social Community. As shown in the quote at the start of this paper the sounds of conversations were cited as a part of the 'massive buzz', and their distinct absence when the 'buzz' had gone. However, as an explicit element in

this research, the sound of conversations and soundscape in CWS was not regarded as important (mean = 2.59), as was previously found by Orel and Alonso Almeida (2019). It must therefore be the act of participating in conversations that creates the 'good vibe' rather than simply the sound. Without the action, aesthetic practice and relations of bodies in conversation, the atmosphere would feel more formalised, restrictive and silent, elevating the sound of 'doing work' (e.g. tapping of the keyboard) and 'being present' (e.g. sounds of swallowing, breathing and rumbling bodies) which could create a fear of disturbance or judgement by others.

Material elements and strategies that create Communal Spaces also make a significant contribution to a 'good vibe' atmosphere and comprise of some of the elements identified by coworkers at the explicit, conscious level that provide a conducive 'full' working experience. However, material elements focused on supporting social interactions were in the majority including spaces focussed on non-work activities ($\lambda = .650$) and larger desks ($\lambda = .566$). Sociomaterially, the larger desk has the material affordance of space for several people to use at the same time, and socioculturally this suggests being open to conversations and adapting working practices accordingly (Suckley and Marsh-Davies, 2026). The atmospheric lens (de Vaujany, 2025; Giovannoni and Quattrone, 2025; Jørgensen and Beyes, 2023) would consider that without these communal spaces, the focus would solely be on completing work-related tasks, with actions being centred around a work device or leaving the CWS for refreshments and mingling with non-CWS users. By appreciating the value of communal areas as part of a 'good vibe', users are also bringing in these unrealised alternatives. The material strategy of open plan design ($\lambda = .559$) was also part of this component and has been found by others to be a key design of CWS (Orel and Bennis, 2021). Socioculturally, this strategy suggests openness (Turco, 2016) through a higher degree of visibility and accessibility (Bouncken and Aslam, 2023) that facilitates encounters and a sense of belonging through co-presence. Working spaces devoid of an open plan layout would provide more private working spaces, where interruptions and distractions are minimised which in turn can support greater levels of concentration and arguably greater productivity (Haynes *et al.*, 2019). However, this layout would defeat the purpose of using spaces that support coworking.

Our research has focused on CWS users as perceiving subjects that are sense-making the material and social elements and strategies that are part of CWS in their construction, using their values, experiences and sociocultural understanding to interpret and contribute to the 'in-between' that is a 'good vibe' atmosphere. Given

this relational, individualised focus, some variation across users was expected, however, our research found that demographics such as gender ($\beta = -.027$, $p > .001$), age ($\beta = -.022$, $p > .001$) and geographic location ($\beta = .082$, $p > .001$) had no significant impact on the perceived composition, nor did employment type ($\beta = .058$, $p > .001$) or level of CWS usage ($\beta = -.046$, $p > .001$). Social Community and Communal Spaces can therefore be considered as universal key components sensed to create a 'good vibe' atmosphere in CWS. With little research undertaken on atmospheres in CWS, it is difficult to compare this universality with previous research. Further research is encouraged to explore this in more depth, quantitatively with a greater sample size that offers the required diversity especially in terms of geographic location and employment type given distinct cultural differences.

Conclusion

Atmospheres are what hits us when entering a room and how the space makes us feel. In this research, we have examined CWS atmospheres and specifically a 'good vibe' atmosphere that has been identified by others as important for CWS users (Appel-Meulenbroek *et al.*, 2021; Endrissat and Leclercq-Vandelannoitte, 2021) to encourage repeat usage that is core to the success of these shared working spaces. Using a combined sociomateriality and atmospheric lens, we identify the sociocultural understanding of the social and material elements and strategies that contribute to the 'in-between' 'good vibe' atmosphere.

At an explicit, conscious level, CWS users identified several material elements as most important for a 'good vibe' atmosphere suggesting that this type of atmosphere is more immediately perceived at a material level rather than sensing the space socially or relationally. Natural light, communal areas and different working spaces were considered most important. However, deeper underlying analysis showed that it is the social elements and strategies forming social communities that are at the heart of a 'good vibe' atmosphere, supported by material elements and strategies for communal spaces.

This research has shown that there is an implicit, unconscious appreciation of the social purpose of coworking needed for creating a 'good vibe' atmosphere. Sense of community, social and work related events and conversations are the core components that provide opportunities for conversations and contributions as a community member. This is in contrast to completing work in a space focussed solely on work tasks, as a consumer of a service, with little spatial or temporal rhythm, and strained interactions with minimal others. By considering the 'half-things' and 'no-things' alternative possibilities of not having these relational opportunities,

the understanding of the 'in-between' that is a 'good vibe' atmosphere has greater clarity. These social elements are supported by material elements/ strategies such as communal areas for longer and more relaxed conversations and open plan design that allows for visibility and accessibility rather than working in a private working space without disturbances or interruptions, and greater inconvenience by seeking outside refreshment. The role of the coworking host as an aesthetic worker is to execute these social strategies and undertake the staging work throughout the CWS. It is the combination of these social and material elements and strategies focussed on social community and communal spaces that is fundamental to 'good vibe' atmospheres.

To support the creation of such atmospheres in CWS and assist with the development of successful shared working spaces that have returning users, we can make several recommendations. To build a sense of community, there needs to be communal spaces such as kitchens, coffee areas that encourage interactions and spaces to dwell. There should also be co-location opportunities in work areas through providing larger desks and open plan design. The coworking hosts' aesthetic work should be focused on creating environments for social interactions and community-building, such as organising social events like breakfast clubs or birthday clubs.

With this research, we make several contributions. Firstly, to the theoretical field we extend the sociomateriality perspective that suggests complete things and their entanglements, by adding an atmospheric lens to consider the 'in-between' and 'no-things' that are neither fully material nor purely subjective. The conceptual model of the elusive 'good vibe' atmosphere uses a sociomaterial lens to explore the relationality between the social and material, and to this we add the 'no-things' possibilities to understanding the 'in-between' which adds a more comprehensive analysis. Methodologically, we contribute a quantitative approach to examining the nature of CWS atmospheres that has reached a large sample across a wide geographical area which has allowed statistical analysis to uncover both explicit and implicit interpretations of what contributes to a 'good vibe'.

As with all research, there are limitations. The main limitation here was the sample size and data collection time. Although 148 CWS users participated, a larger sample would have allowed more analysis into sociocultural interpretations and to establish the true universality of the findings. The data was also collected over an 11-month period and there will undoubtedly have been changes in the CWS offer during this time that may have not been fully captured.

We would encourage future research to further develop the 'good vibe' concept, as the findings revealed it operates at two distinct levels: an explicit, conscious appreciation of material elements and a deeper, implicit understanding centred on social purpose. This complexity warrants additional investigation to fully unpack how coworkers construct and experience atmospheres in shared workspaces, and support CWS with the strategies that they employ for their continued operation.

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“Along with the winds of life” with Ella Hafermalz on Working and Existing with Technology

Gislene Feiten Haubrich⁷

In this edition of JOCO, we have another fantastic scholar contributing to our interview section. We have the opportunity to talk with Ella Hafermalz, an authority when it comes to discussions on new ways of working. From remote work to generative AI, Ella's contribution to the community studying technology and work is widely recognized. I had the pleasure of working with Ella for two years in my academic journey, and beyond being an inspiring academic, she is a kind and supportive human being. I'm grateful we could find some time in her busy schedule to talk about her work, the methodological challenges of studying technology use, and more.

Dr. [Ella Hafermalz](#) is an Associate Professor in the [KIN Center for Digital Innovation](#) within the [School of Business and Economics](#) at [Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam](#) (VU Amsterdam). Dr. Hafermalz completed her PhD in *Information Systems and Work and Organisational Studies* at the *University of Sydney Business School* in Australia. Additionally, she holds degrees in *Teaching, Media and Communications*, and *Cultural Studies* from the *University of Melbourne*. She also serves as an Associate Editor for the [European Journal of Information Systems](#), and a member of the editorial review board for [Organization Studies](#) and [Journal of Information Technology](#). As a researcher, Dr. Hafermalz aims to bridge the gap between academic theory and practical organizational applications. To deeply understand what it truly feels like to exist and work through modern technology, she frequently frames her qualitative insights through the lenses of philosophy, social theory, and the arts.

Enjoy the reading.

Gislene Haubrich: Hello, Ella. Thank you so much for your time and for joining us for this interview for JOCO.

Ella Hafermalz: Good to be talking with you!

Gislene Haubrich: I know you're very busy and full of activities, so we're really grateful that you are taking the time to share all your knowledge and your perspectives, which are always so insightful and inspiring. I'm sure this will be a great conversation. We usually start these interviews for JOCO aiming to learn a bit more about the person behind the scholar, if we can make such a separation. Can you tell a little bit about what brought you to this journey you are today? Currently, I guess, Generative AI (GenAI) is on the top of your mind and research agenda, but also, you've been studying New Ways

of Working, and are an authority on the topic. So, how did your journey progress?

Ella Hafermalz: Yes, so good to be talking with you. To answer this means going back a while. So, to go back to my youth in Australia, I studied media Communications and Cultural Studies. I really loved it. Cultural Studies, in particular, is such a rich field, thinking about new media coming in and how the world changes all the time. Lots of philosophy, a lot of art and cultural content. I've always been inspired by popular culture as well. I loved all of that. And then I became a high school teacher and then worked in recruitment for a teaching program. And I sort of was searching, basically. I knew that I liked teaching. I knew that I liked research, but I wasn't exactly sure what to do with all of that. And, for some reason, an academic career hadn't really occurred to me. I didn't really know what that was. I didn't know what it meant to be an academic. It's funny how when you're at uni, you don't necessarily look at your teachers as professionals who you might be able to be like. It just didn't occur to me.

I was then based in the East Coast of Australia and then I moved to Perth on the West Coast - and was working remotely for a company in Melbourne (about 4 hours flight and a time zone change away – it is a big country!). During that time, I felt quite isolated from my organization, from my team. I felt far away. And then I got a new job, which was based in Sydney, but I was still in Perth. And that gave me a bit of a comparison point. This other company had a lot of remote workers, and when I was working for that company, I felt quite included and like I was part of a team. I was not physically closer to my teammates, but I felt existentially closer to them. And I realized: 'okay, well, the difference is how we use technology, how we communicate, the way that we have group calls, the way people are messaging each other throughout the day.' And because I guess that was a natural experiment of a kind, I noticed: 'okay, remote working *can* work. It actually fills a lot of needs. But the practices matter.'

Already, around 2014 in Australia, it was something we were talking about – telework, they called it back then. We need to have this arrangement as a possibility because it makes us resilient to shocks, transport problems, natural disasters. It wasn't discussions of a pandemic then, but that turned out to be what we needed resilience for. So, during that time, I realized, okay: 'there's something interesting here.' *How does remote working work* is a topic I'm interested in. *The use of technology* is something I

would like to know more about. I missed studying. I missed that inquiry, and I thought: 'okay, I want to go and do that. Maybe I'll apply for a PhD.'

I'd read a book by [Melissa Gregg](#), who's from Cultural Studies, about remote working called [Work's Intimacy](#), and I was very inspired by that. So, I reached out to her. And she said, oh, yeah, it would be good to do a thesis on remote work, but I'm actually leaving to go to the US. Why don't you contact my friend, my colleague, [Kristine Dery](#) in the business school at Sydney? And I thought: 'okay, give that a go.' And then I started chatting with Kristine. I had never envisaged myself in a business school; I thought that I was a humanities person. It's funny how life kind of leads you along. And because the topic was relevant to the Australian government agenda, I was able to get a scholarship to do my PhD. And then I moved over to Sydney to pursue that. That's how I ended up with this topic and in a business school; all of this was just going along with the winds of life, really.

Gislene Haubrich: Well, that's so fascinating. And it's interesting that you're mentioning these differences between the companies and your own experience. How did them shape how you moved forward with your research?

Ella Hafermalz: I respect authors that advocate for using your experiences in your research. [Jorgen Sandberg](#) and [Mats Alvesson](#), they talk about this as well, [your pre-understanding](#). I think a lot of my research in general is inspired by a particular feeling that I've had, which I find hard to articulate or explain or put theory to, and then I like to really interrogate that and sort of chase it. So, that feeling of deep loneliness that I experienced as a remote worker is something I wanted to understand better and know more about. And for me, the best way to do that was to read, but then also to talk to people who are in this position.

When I started studying remote work, I was both very interested in and inspired by conceptual work that examines this very existential feeling of feeling left out, of feeling lonely, you know, fear of missing out, all of these things. It has been a topic discussed in philosophical literature for hundreds of years. So, there's already a lot that we can learn from the human experience. And then there are the specificities of geography, technology, infrastructures, organizational setup, and that I was able to explore by talking to people.

Whenever I had an interview with someone who worked remote, I felt already like there was a level of empathy there, of some awareness of what it might be like for them. Most of my interviews were over the phone. This

was before COVID, so the video conference was not such an established genre. I mainly talked to people over the phone. And I know that back then, remote workers mainly did their work via phone. So, I could also understand that this was a very authentic way of them communicating about how they felt, and what they thought and about their experiences. So, I could also relate to that, that mode of communication. My own experiences were there methodologically, in terms of sampling, the questions that I asked, the philosophy that I found inspiring, very informative.

Gislene Haubrich: We will talk a bit more about these inspiration sources. If I understand you correctly, because I've read your research and now I'm listening to you, I see that the connection between workplace in isolation or socialization of work, depending on how we look at it, in technology-intensive environments, that is, I feel, that the red thread for your research. That is also present in your work with Jana Retkowsky and Marleen Huysman, particularly in the paper [Managing a ChatGPT-empowered workforce: Understanding its affordances and side effects](#). In that sense, did it feel natural to move, to progress this way in your research? From hybrid work and remote work towards GenAI.

Ella Hafermalz: Yeah, that's a good question. And this was a journey for me. So, after studying remote work, I moved to the Netherlands and to the KIN group, and that's when I started to investigate hybrid work, which seemed like an extension from remote work. At the same time with Marleen and the [AI@Work Research Group](#), there was a lot of research about AI, which I was also interested in, and you know, so much great research happening around me. I was also looking for 'how do I connect to that'. At that time, it felt like two separate topics. My new ways of working research and then some interest in AI. When generative AI came along, that's when things started to connect. And that is because the conditions of post-COVID hybrid working turned out to be a catalyst for some of what was going on in the way that people use ChatGPT.

To be specific, people were already quite fragmented in the workplace because of hybrid working. Some people working from home, some people in the office, and very idiosyncratic schedules. Whereas we previously might have all just been in the routine of coming in most days, sitting next to each other, and so you have this familiarity with one another; the routines that we all see now are quite fragmented. You might not know where your colleagues are or when you're going to see them, which means that it's harder to reach out and ask a question very simply, because there's not a colleague sitting next to you.

And then you have this large language model coming in, and it is always there. It is always ready; you can ask it any question and it's going to answer you at any moment of the day. That becomes very appealing because the cost of reaching out to a colleague has gone up. So, this technology was entering a workspace that was already configured in a way that made it attractive to go to ChatGPT before you go to a colleague. And that's also what we found in our research. So, *there* is a bridge between the new ways of working context, and the research I've done there, and generative AI! The older modes of AI, more predictive, prescriptive, discriminative AI, that felt like a different topic. LLMs though, because they're so conversational, that starts to really come into the same sphere as new ways of working for me.

Gislene Haubrich: Digging deeper in these phenomena you're carving out around workplace and genAI. If we take particularly your research on new ways of working and the discussion about exile, published in *Organization Studies*, *Out of the Panopticon and into Exile: Visibility and Control in Distributed New Culture Organizations*. When you look back at that paper and what is happening now, do you think that people are getting more exiled now? Or less, perhaps? How do you think the technology is now impacting that concept if you look back at it?

Ella Hafermalz: Actually, I think something very insidious is happening if I think about the world of work with LLMs now. And we started to get to this also in our recent paper in *Academy of Management Discoveries*, *Harnessing a "Spirited Technology": How Working with Generative AI Collapses the Creative Process*, but I'm still thinking it through and probably will for quite some time. What I'm talking about is, I think, people *feel* less exiled, but that may come at a cost. We have this idea of ChatGPT as our 'number one knowledge assistant'. I think a lot of people feel quite supported by this technology. It's always there, ready to help, and it does, tangibly. It helps when you're trying to do some tasks. It can help you overcome some procrastination, fear of a blank page, all of these things. Or with AI agents now, they're also doing tasks for people. So, it can make people feel less on the outer, more supported, they may feel more content. It may reduce the sense of being 'exiled'. At the same time however, ChatGPT is *not* a human. It's a false substitution, basically. So, we may *feel* like we're interacting with others: the technology is anthropomorphized, it's helpful, it's there for you, it doesn't judge.

But at the end of the day, we are *not* interacting with others. And there are resources that you build up when you interact with other people, to think about this in

quite an instrumental way. From working with humans on tasks, friendships arise. Someone can see from one day to the next if you're not doing okay; or someone might introduce you to someone else, or just widen your social world in various ways. Human interaction builds reciprocity around emotional connection and also forces us to deal with the challenge of not getting along, sometimes. Which builds resilience to discomfort and teaches us to cope in a world where we are all different. All these things that are very human. That is not happening when we work with AI, even though we have a kind of illusion of collaboration. So, I think we as a society and also in organisational contexts will start to feel the consequences of that. So short term, I think that it alleviates some of the fear of exile. But that relief probably gives you less reason to see that your connections are actually not in place the way that perhaps they could be or should be. That may lull us into a false sense of security that may actually deepen the sense of exile in the long term...but we'll see.

Gislene Haubrich: That's interesting because I would assume the opposite. If we are really relying on these tools and assume they are our best buddies, it means we acknowledged feeling left out of other conversations, so that we "chose" to connect with technology, increasing our perception of isolation. But, in a way, if we are replacing the organization with that relationship with the chatbot, so we might feel less isolated short term. That is super interesting. Let's see how it goes. Now talking particularly about your most recent paper on *Harnessing a 'Spirited Technology'*. How did the metaphor with the 'Spirited Horse' to discuss our relationship with GenAI come along?

Ella Hafermalz: What we're talking about here is a metaphor that comes from Don Ihde. I had read his book, *Technology and the Lifeworld* during my PhD, and he offers an interesting framework. So Ihde talks about different ways that people relate to technology and the world. The way that we use glasses as a technology is different from how we use heating. Glasses help us to see the world, quite literally, but we're not meant to be looking at the glasses; that's not the point. Heating is in the background. It's important as a technology, but it is again different to how we look at glasses. We also have technologies like a thermometer, where we can interpret the world *through* the technology.

Then, there's the special type of relationship, which Ihde calls *alterity relations*, which is when you encounter a technology as something to interact with. It has a degree of otherness to it. It isn't a full other in terms of being this fully agential sentient being, but there is a certain sense of it being an interactant. And chatbots are a classic example of this that have been around for decades. But it

can go further – for example, I grew up with a car, a VW camper van that had a name. We called it *Popper* because the roof popped up. It was like a member of our family. It's not unusual actually for humans to have this sense of alterity relations with technologies. You can get attached to them or maybe talk to them – a teddy bear, or even a pet rock or something! So, it's not unusual. Within this category of alterity relations, Ihde has this little section where he talks about *spirited technologies*. Already at Sydney Uni, [Mike Seymour](#) and I started thinking about [these spirited technologies](#) (Mike does very cool research on e.g. avatars, lifelike avatars).

Jana, Marleen and I got interested in this idea of spirited technologies in the context of creative work. We really further developed this idea of a spirited technology as one that carries out instructions but is a bit unpredictable and unruly. Particularly interesting to us was that Ihde explains that when you're an experienced user, you quite like spirited technologies that push back a little. And here is where he brings in the spirited horse as an analogy: if you're a very good rider, it is more interesting, more exciting, and possibly more beneficial in terms of winning a race if your horse is a bit spirited. It has a bit, you know, this capacity to push back, to pull in different directions, and you need to be responsive and get along with that. It's actually the same if you play a musical instrument, when you start playing a musical instrument, it's good to just have an instrument that complies. But the very experienced musician enjoys an instrument with a bit of personality, with a bit of flair. It has some quirks that you have to get along with. But if you steer it well, then you get something really interesting out of it.

All this to say, when Jana and Marleen and I started to study Generative AI in the context of creative work, and specifically this was the text-to-image application Mid-journey, we saw that experienced creatives were also, in a similar manner, inspired by the little quirks that come back in the images when they prompt. It's not entirely predictable. So, it was offering a little bit more, a little bit different from what you've asked. And that gives you something to react to. For skilled creatives who know how to steer and, you know, adjust the next prompt and react to things, it has this effect of like harnessing a spirited technology. So that's how we came to that. I read it previously and when we started studying this phenomenon, it had the same quality, and we went in that direction, with many iterations in between.

Gislene Haubrich: It's such a rich perspective and it's so inspiring for us to think about this technology. Also, as a counterpoint, because usually when people are talking about ChatGPT or any of these chatbots, the complaint is that they are very compliant. So, they will 'tell' you what

you want 'to hear,' that they will not really challenge you. And in a way, if I understand what you're saying, perhaps that's not the case. The case is that we don't know yet how to challenge it enough, to iterate enough, perhaps because we are too naive to, or at least this is the general understanding, that it's kind of agreeing with you, and it feels like it is not really helping you.

Ella Hafermalz: If you have an avatar or a chatbot that you're interacting with, it's very irritating if it only complies, only agrees. It's engaging for humans to have a bit of a bit of pushback, a bit of struggle. And with ChatGPT, it's an interesting case because, we actually have a lot more control over how it interacts than we think. For example, in the recent versions, you can change the settings, and you can ask it to be less compliant. You do have some say over what mode of interaction you're going into. Temperature for instance is basically a setting that controls how much randomness or variability is incorporated into the model's responses. If you turn the temperature down, the model tends to give more predictable responses, because it is sampling more heavily from the highest-probability next tokens. So, it is experienced as being less spirited, in our definition. Whereas if you increase the temperature, the model samples from a broader range of possible next tokens, which can produce responses that feel less predictable. So, we have some control over these settings, and it is worth thinking about the role that this plays in how we want to use Generative AI.

And then, there's also the *skill* that goes into working with AI. And that's something that we've found that has not been acknowledged sufficiently. There is a lot of talk about human-AI interaction, but we don't often think about what *type* of human and particularly the fact that a novice and an expert are different in what they bring to that interaction. And this is also related to hallucinations. So, in a sense, you know, the unpredictability of generative AI often gets talked about in terms of hallucinations. "We don't know if it's going to make stuff up". And if you're only dealing with really factual contexts, of course, that's a problem to solve. Also, if you're a novice and are in contact with these technologies and something erroneous comes out, it is a real risk because you don't have the knowledge needed to identify that it's wrong!

But in creative work, facts are not the main criterion of quality. Novelty and interest are important. Quirks can be useful. We were studying creative *experts* who had built up a whole repertoire of experiences in a non-AI setting. They brought that experience and expertise to their interactions with AI. And they could use AI as a spirited technology to generate images that surprised them – it

allowed them to have ‘aesthetic experiences’ that they could reflect upon, and use to move forward. Using Generative AI was similar for them to what one would usually get with a team, where you throw out ideas, they push back, they'd sketch something and you have something to react to. In a creative process, you need something outside of yourself to react to. We found that AI as a spirited technology can offer that opportunity - to a skilled operator.

Gislene Haubrich: It's nice that you're also putting this context very clearly because when we do research with other types of workers, one of the questions that I hear most people asking is how can we have the perfect prompt? And there's like a myriad of courses now trying to teach you how to have the perfect prompt. And in a way, if we find the perfect prompt, if that is to exist, we are kind of capping all this pushback you were just mentioning that's so important for us to really get something interesting out of this relationship with the technology.

Ella Hafermalz: Absolutely, and we're in the paper even quite critical of prompt engineering as the main focus for AI skills. There's something to be learned there for sure, but what we saw is not a one-shot interaction. Building something with AI is an extremely iterative process. And we're not saying you *should* build things with AI, but if you're going to do that, then it's extremely iterative. I mean, these creators that we studied would work for hours, days, just prompting, prompting, prompting, prompting. So, one beautifully engineered prompt will only get you so far. It's all about what do you do with the output that's thrown at you in that moment. What will be your next move? And that requires skill. So, there are real concerns here, for how do we foster that skill, when the skilled workers are operating mainly with the technology rather than with teams where you can bring novices in?

So, the socialization problem. Training newcomers is going to be a big issue in the long term.

The prompt is such a small part of the story. It's also this very embodied skill that's been built up over time that's needed. That is not easily replaced or instilled in someone. And then it's also this process of being open to what you encounter and exercising this aesthetic reflexivity. Essentially, you see something, whether it's text or an image, and you allow yourself to be in some way affected by that in order to form an opinion about what should be done next. It's not just critical thinking. It's being *moved* by it, either to go, that's rubbish, and therefore I want to go here, or, oh, that's sort of interesting, this little quirk over here, there could be something there. That's why we refer to harnessing a spirited technology – it is skilled, active, work.

Gislene Haubrich: This has been such an inspiring conversation – as always, Ella – but I know you have another engagement right after we finish recording this conversation. If we think about the research on new ways of working, which is an interesting umbrella, and I guess working with AI is one of these new ways of working. How do you think the research, like to directions do you think we should pay attention or should or could go with research in this area?

Ella Hafermalz: One area where we are scratching our head, and also getting excited about possibilities, is the methodological aspect. I think probably always, but even to a greater extent now, the method seems to really shape what you see when you study AI. There is a lot of experimental research. There is much to be gained from that, and at the same time, we want to know: what does this look like at the prompt face? What's going on in organizations? And here we have such a challenge to our traditional qualitative observational methods because a lot of AI use is *shadow AI* use. It's covert, it's hidden. People don't want to show or even talk openly about what they're doing with AI. The way that they use the tools is also very intertwined with their personal lives. We can't always ask people to show us their ChatGPT logs, for example, because there's a bit of work in that chat window, but there's also health concerns and relationship queries. And this is so mixed that where work is happening is also where life is happening to an even greater extent than perhaps, we've known for some time. And methodologically, this is getting challenging. But also, some exciting opportunities there, which we're exploring!

Gislene Haubrich: Our final question: If we want to learn more, read more about the relationship between new ways of working and GenAI, where else could we look for? What is important that we read to get inspired to think further this relationship?

Ella Hafermalz: This is a very fast-moving world, so it's very fragmented how to keep up with the conversation. So, I'm reading people's posts on LinkedIn. I watch a lot of Instagram reels where they are making skits - humorous videos - about what's going on in organizations, with '[tokenmaxxing](#)' for example. And I find that level of cultural analysis sometimes a step ahead of our more institutionalized press. I do find that the Financial Times has some very thoughtful content on these topics. It brings in geopolitics and economics, it's very multidisciplinary; you're paying for good journalism there. Of course, there's great academic papers coming out on these topics too, but because it takes years to publish our work, this more kind of iterative, rough, but

still very insightful popular content, is where I get a lot of inspiration. Talking to my students and even asking them to write hand-written reflections on their AI use has been extremely eye opening. There are lots of little ways of surfacing things that are not so easy to get a hold of at the moment: *What is it really like to work, study, live in this world?* So again, popular culture, there we go, full circle. I think that comedy, parody, is where we're getting some of the most insightful takes on what work is like today. And I will continue to be inspired by that. It is an amazing skill to capture phenomena in 30 second clips that make you laugh – and think. I love it.

Gislene Haubrich: Thank you so much, Ella, for your time and generosity on sharing your inspiring ideas and knowledge. We could continue this conversation for hours, as I would love to hear more about your experience with the students – you just won a teaching award! Big congrats! – and you're just telling me about the project on AI Literacy with schoolteachers. But these are all reasons for us keep in touch and follow your work.

Ella Hafermalz: Thank you.



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