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Irony's Architecture: Reflections on a
Photographic Research Project

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a research approach based on irony, rather than certainty. Using Richard Rorty's conception of irony, we contend that much *traditional* research in management presents a *final language* which is implicit in both the construction of a research method and its final presentation as *findings*. This paper suggests we should take irony more seriously, and deliberately construct research to allow and encourage re-description by our research's final arbiters – its readers, and even its subjects. Further, we advocate that by inviting irony into our work, we encourage greater identification between ourselves, our audience of readers, and the subjects of our work. We illustrate our argument by reflecting on a recent photographic research project which was a collaborative effort between management researchers and an artist. We show how the simple *architecture* of this project was built from doubt and how irony is communicated through the pictures. We then show how photography can be a useful technique that encourages readers to engage in re-description of *petit récits* (small stories), told through images. We discuss our reflections by focusing on the implications of our research for management education.

INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses irony in management research, and why researchers might wish to court irony more directly in their work. In short, we argue for a research approach based on irony and doubt, rather than certainty. We contend that much *traditional* research in management presents a ‘final’ language (Rorty, 1989, p. 74) which is implicit in both the construction of a research *method* and its final presentation as *findings*. We argue that we should take irony more seriously, and deliberately construct research to allow and encourage re-description by our research’s final arbiters – its readers. By inviting dialogue into our work, we encourage greater identification between ourselves, our audience of readers, and the subjects of our work.

In particular we aim to show how quite simple artistic approaches, based in the field of art theory, can be applied by researchers in management. We illustrate our argument by reflecting on a recent photographic research project which was a collaborative effort between management researchers and an artist. We show how the simple *architecture* of this project was built from doubt, and uses irony to encourage readers to engage in re-description of our *petit récits* (Lyotard, 1979/1984), small stories told through photographs.

Drawing on some recent writing on qualitative methods, and particularly arts-based (Finley, 2005) and visual research methods (Harper, 2005; Scott, 2004), we show how an arts-based approach can be used to complement existing research practices.

We start by sketching out for the reader why irony is an important material element in structuring research. We look at this from two ends: the formation of research (its architecture), and its reading by an audience (the readers’ responses). We first introduce the concept of irony, relying mainly on Rorty’s (1989) use of the term. We then consider the reader using theory about art and its reception, linking our paper to other recent approaches that have used literature, in particular, to consider similar themes in organizational analysis.

Having delineated our theoretical stance, we then move to discuss our specific project, an illustrative case which involves a photographic project. We begin our example by describing how photography has been used almost exclusively as an evidential tool in research. We argue that our project is an arts-based approach to photographic research, rather than using photography to present verification of a theory or perspective. We describe our project, which involved management researchers working collaboratively with a mixed-media painter/photographer, and discuss how the project was conceived and executed.

We then consider four photo sets from our project. For each photo set we discuss a different aspect of how irony is built into the project, and how, in effect, irony works. We show how

the *architecture of irony* is designed into a project (using a simple visual rhetorical strategy); and how, through this architecture, irony is fostered in the reader – the viewer of the images. Through this discussion, we show how art empathetically engages the reader. We complete our paper by focusing on the implications of our research for management education.

IRONY

Irony has its roots in the Greek tragic theatre where the audience is let in on the ending of a hero's actions but without the hero knowing how things will pan out. Thus irony provides a tool for the audience to analyse dramatic action in the light of the expected outcome as the drama unfolds (Stanford, 1983). Therefore, through irony the audience is privy to knowledge that allows them to interrogate dramatic events *in situ*.

In contemporary understandings, irony defies simple description. Irony's meaning is complex but in a literary sense it is generally thought of as a mode of speech in which derived meaning is contrary to the actual words. To illustrate, Hatch offers an account of 'a passenger who says "smooth move" to a reckless driver. The meaning of the remark is found in its contradiction: "That was not a smooth move"' (Hatch, 1997, p. 277).

As a rhetorical device, then, irony involves both contrast and incongruity where disparate and sometimes implied ideas are placed alongside each other to advance a narrative. Therefore irony relies on the perceiver's ability to read the paradoxes inherent within narratives (Nodelman, 1988).

Extending these ideas, irony can be understood as an aesthetic valuation by an audience, which relies on a sharp discord between the real and the ideal. It can also be understood as absolute negativity, with the power to undo both texts and readers. Irony has a contradictory nature, involving endless reflection and constant reversals. As a moment of irony arrives, it ensures incomprehensibility at the moment it compels speech.

It is important to note that ironic contrast operates at an ideological level in that it addresses world views and associated belief systems that underpin story lines. Therefore one or more of the participants in the ironic situation may be unaware that they are victims of irony. In photography this *victim* can be either the viewer or the subject of the image. Ironic victimisation can occur when the world views of the perceiver or subject remain intact, notwithstanding the deeper meanings within the picture that challenge these existing ideologies. In summary, we can say along with Scott that the elements of irony are: two ideological regimes in conflict with one another; a disassembling component involving

ignorance on someone's part; and an obvious incongruity which alerts the viewer to the potential for irony (Scott, 2004, p. 35).

Richard Rorty's use of the term irony has its own inflections that assist in enlarging its usage. He relocates irony from the object, whether that is literary or visual, to the subject as the reader of texts. Hence for Rorty the prosopopoeia becomes pre-eminent; the ironist who is able to see beyond surface readings and explore deeper meanings inherent within the text. In order to understand this shift, Rorty relates the word irony closely to *doubt*. He argues that an ironist has three defining characteristics, which first embrace an ability to doubt, then second to accept doubt as a necessary condition of existence and finally within this doubting frame, understand that language is in constant re-descriptive flux. In full Rorty puts this thus:

I shall define an 'ironist' as someone who fulfils three conditions: (1) She has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies, vocabularies taken as final by people or books she has encountered; (2) she realizes that argument phrased in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts; (3) insofar as she philosophizes about her situation, she does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others, that it is in touch with a power not herself.

(Rorty, 1989, p. 73)

The generic trait of ironists is that they do not hope to have their doubts about their final vocabularies settled by something larger than themselves. This means that their criterion for resolving doubts, their criterion of private perfection, is autonomy rather than affiliation to a power other than themselves. All any ironist can measure success against is the past – not by living up to it, but by redescribing it in his terms, thereby becoming able to say, 'Thus *I* willed it' (Rorty, 1989, p. 97, emphasis added).

The language of irony avoids positions becoming fixed; and while doubt accepts the validity of a set of beliefs and firmly held positions, at the same time it 'constantly questions and doubts' those assumptions (Rehn, 2002, p. 47). Rorty explains this fluidity by arguing that 'the terms in which [we] describe [our]selves are subject to change, always aware of the contingency and fragility of [our] final vocabularies, and thus of [our]selves' (Rorty, 1989, p. 74). For Rorty the less certain the final vocabulary, the more open we become to actively and continually negotiate meaning. Through irony an idea is interrogated by inquiring into what lies beyond that concept. In Rorty's inimitable language, irony searches for the 'painted backdrop' behind the painted backdrop (Rorty, 1989, p. 54), notions that are not seen but are nonetheless present, and yet that are still to be seen and acknowledged.

At this place in the discussion, three issues need to be highlighted. The first is that, implicit in Rorty's discussion of irony, is the idea that an ironist may operate like an artist. An artist presents a work of art out of inner sensations and perceptions, and observations of the external world, by intentionally bringing into existence images that are formed in the imagination. Therefore artists re-describe their reality using learned techniques such as writing, painting, music, and so on. The second is that although some might argue that irony involves unequal positioning where a greater truth is set against a lesser one, Rorty argues that language is always contingent, and that an ironist avoids any *final language*, and that one idea is no more important than its ironic contrast. By holding this position it is not possible to be *pompous* or *lecturing*, qualities that are often found in satire and parody. Here the language game is more strident and pointed, where the satirist is more likely to point out contradictions between an observation and a *reality*, especially if it involves human suffering. Irony, on the other hand, is both an attitude and a tool used by comedians, writers, and other artists (including musicians - see Sheinberg, 2000) to probe beyond prevalent ideologies, thereby offering new ways of viewing the world. Finally, it should be noted that irony is not necessarily funny and it does not have to involve humour.

Rorty clearly admires ethnographers, writers and journalists, who he argues are more influential than academic philosophers as agents of emancipation: '...ironist philosophy has not done, and will not do, much for freedom and equality. But ... literature ... as well as ethnography and journalism, is doing a lot' (Rorty 1989, p. 94). By implication, we suggest that researchers, particularly those interested in effecting social change, might wish to consider irony more seriously. With re-description comes a process of creation, but how do these notions translate into research practice?

At this point we turn to the idea of research design which we frame within the concept of the *architecture* of irony. Design is an important part of any research project and as we stated in our introduction, the purpose of this paper is to help close the gap between artistic processes and more traditional methods: to make art-based research more accessible. To many, art may seem like a secret or even elitist language specifically designed to exclude the uninitiated. Our rejoinder is that *both* art making *and* the research process are activities that require theory, tools and techniques, which can be learned through active engagement.

Although the concept of design is invoked in discussions of research methods, it is usually considered in the context of the applied arts and other creative endeavours. We adopt the word *architecture* in this paper because it evokes the idea of creating spaces in which poeticisation can happen, and avoids the more prosaic meanings of finality that the term

design now suggests. Following Bachelard (1958/1964), architecture, invokes the idea of 'felicitous space' (p. xxxi) which embraces the idea of *invitation*. For Bachelard, space is not closed or finalised, but rather, opens up to possibility. Such a space is 'eulogised ... and is ... seized upon by the imagination [and] cannot remain [an] indifferent space subject to the measures and estimates of the surveyor. It has to be lived in, not in its positivity, but with all the partiality of the imagination' (p. xxxii).

By combining Rorty's ironist with the notion of an active architecture which creates a poeticised space, we now turn to the meaning-maker: the reader of texts. In the next part of this discussion we look particularly at irony in visual images.

IRONIC READING AND VISUAL IMAGES

The discursive turn in organisation studies has seen the adoption of methods of narrative deconstruction. Organisational researchers are now deploying tools traditionally used by literary analysts, translating them into management and organisational issues (Czarniawska, 1998; Teo-Dixon & Monin, 2007). These studies place the reader as the interpreter of the text. Ironic readings of management texts have also been appearing in mainstream journals (Monin, 2004; Monin & Monin, 2005; Monin & Sayers, 2006), and students are learning how to use the techniques of humour (satire and parody) to critique management practices (Sayers & Monin, 2007, in press). In a related and concurrent development there has been an interest in using theories of art to explore management and organisational themes (for example see Carr & Hancock, 2003; and Hazen, 1993). This has spilled over into the use of artistic mediums to express organisational issues such as evidenced at conferences such as the Art of Management (now in its fourth iteration).

Although researchers are often fascinated by the arts and their potential to communicate, *using* artistic methods may seem too difficult for most researchers who lack the requisite artistic education. Nevertheless, sporadic engagement with methods more often associated with the arts is gradually gaining a foothold in the academy. Many researchers have, of course, branched out and fully embraced techniques of fiction, poetry and art, or at least pointed out how boring and self-indulgent much academic writing has become (for a discussion see the polemic piece by Grey & Sinclair, 2006). Fictive techniques in academic writing have started to make inroads into mainstream management research, but this remains the exception rather than the rule (e.g. Watson, 2000). Most relevant for this paper, researchers have started to fully engage with multi-media techniques and are presenting research in new visual and aural formats (as discussed in Harper, 2005).

This is all very healthy for management and organisation studies. Organisational research has mushroomed in an environment that values alternative methods of engagement. There is a long and vigorous tradition to this approach, and much of this development has grown out of the discursive arts, especially in the use of poetry and the novel as ways of understanding organisational life. For instance Bakhtin's work on dialogue (1994) uses Dostoevsky's novels, and from his insights notions like polyphony and centrifugal force have become apt lenses through which to understand organisations (Bathurst, 2004; Hazen, 1993). Beyond organisations, Rorty himself in *Contingency, irony, and solidarity* uses the works of Nabokov (*Lolita* and *Invitation to a beheading*), and Orwell (1984), to discuss how literature might make us as citizens become less cruel.

In this paper, we contribute to these growing trends by advocating for an artistic approach to research, where the methods of art are invoked in the design of a project. In particular, we stimulate this inquiry through the notion of *irony*, a common artistic and rhetorical device to communicate paradox and contradiction. To explore the indeterminate we use photography. However, because photographs are polysemous the art form sits in an ambiguous place in the debate around art and research.

Photography has a long history of being used in research (Pink et al., 2004). With advances into digital formats, photography is a relatively easy medium to use and has evidential qualities that make it more understandable to many organisational researchers than other more abstract art forms (Secondulfo, 1997). Consequently it is probably the most used research method outside of traditional verbal and written forms of knowledge, and its use is increasing.

As a method, photography has been used extensively in anthropology (Pink, 2001), in sociology (Prosser, 1996) and now is being used increasingly in organisational and management research (e.g. Warren, 2005). Social documentary or photo-journalistic methods are common, but other methods are also being adapted from ethnography, visual sociology (Harper, 2005) and the arts. Researchers employing photography can range from lightly illustrative use of photographs to methods such as photo-elicitation (Clark-Ibanez, 2004), narrative inquiry (Harrison, 2002) and photographic journals and photo-voice (Martinsons, 1996; Warren, 2005). In recent years photography is being explored as an explicit and independent research (and action learning) methodology by giving the camera to students (Jones & Noble, 2001) or organisational members (Warren, 2002).

These developments have enabled organisational researchers to turn with confidence to the language of art and to use art/photography as a means of organisational critique (Poulson,

2005). In visual sociology the World Wide Web can be used to disseminate results of digitally recorded ethnographic research in real-time, the production of interactive CDs and DVDS involving text, video, photographs, and photographic/video/music montages (all discussed in Harper, 2005). Outside academic confines photographs have proved a powerful medium through which to communicate organisational issues, such as organisational health and safety (Dotter, 1998), people's relationship to their tools and work's changing nature (Friedlander, 2002), and issues for people in offices (an exhibition reported on by Cohen & Tyler, 2004).

Many research projects that use photography are ethnographic in orientation, and implicitly use artistic methods, as the researchers use the photographs to communicate using aesthetically pleasing, often dramatic techniques. For example, Steiger used still photographs to create a moving slide show of people commuting to and from work (Steiger, 2000). These more artistic uses of visual media, however, are still primarily concerned with exploring aesthetic issues and creating visual montages to communicate or enhance reality.

To find the deliberate use of visual irony one has to look to the visual arts and political criticism. Photography is medium that is well suited to making quick visual statements of social conditions. This can be attributed to its immediacy and its effectiveness in freezing a moment in time as a means of getting its message across.

One technique used in visual irony is to juxtapose image and text allowing the two to conflict with each other, as is the case with Barbara Kruger's *I shop therefore I am* (1987). In this instance ironic intent is easier to read because text and image can be played off against each other, with the words providing the mention which the image then undermines in some way. Another is to set two images side-by-side so the contradictions become evident. For example Peter Kennard's *Defended to death* (1982) shows planet earth with a mask on, the Russian and American flags behind each lens of the goggles, and missiles sprouting out of the mouthpiece. Here the ironic message is clear: by taking measures to save itself, the earth is killing itself.

Juxtaposition, reversal, literalisation, hyperbole, register shifts and corruption are devices that can be used visually or verbally to signal ironic intent (Hutcheon, 1985; Scott, 2004). Scott's summary of these techniques shows their commonality. He claims that, 'What they all have in common is that they provide a means of incorporating, or at least alluding to, the original proposition which is to be questioned by means of these distorting devices' (Scott, 2004, p. 39).

Having discussed irony in general, the issue of architecture, and the process of reading, especially visual images, we now move on to discuss our particular photographic project.

IRONY'S ARCHITECTURE: METHOD

The aim of our photographic research project was to investigate and also to make problematic, work identity by juxtaposing images of people at work next to those of the same subjects at home. The project arose out of research interests in the team converging around work-life balance, organisational identity, photography, art and aesthetics. It was conceived of as a photographic investigation that would try and show something of the multiple identities of the post-modern subject by inviting people to pose in their workplaces and in their homes next to things that were important to them.

Our aim in this project was to present at an exhibition, facilitating, we hoped, readings between work and home, eliciting aspects of multiple identity in the subject and also hoping to unsettle viewers' static conceptions of identity. Irony was inferred because we wished to invoke doubt in the photographs.

Henry Symonds, the photographer, is a mixed-media abstract artist who works with digital images, also teaches and considers himself a *visual researcher*. His present artistic interests lie in the issue of *translation* drawing on Stuart Hall and Maharaj Sarat. Usually Henry's work is abstract, and lately has involved large installations where he paints over digital reproductions of nostalgic and culturally specific kitsch commodities like Pacific Island plastic tablecloths, and 1960s classic carpets and wallpapers. The mixed media renderings are colourful, arresting, aesthetically pleasing, and sell well commercially. Although in the current assignment Henry was concerned to present the subject in a naturalistic way and to provide *realistic*, rather than *artistic* photographs, he readily admits that his artistic training as a painter led him to make choices on behalf of the subjects about framing and composition. These choices can be seen in the symmetry of the shots, and the use of light.

The photographs were constructed thoughtfully in order to see how notions of doubt play out empirically, and to ensure that subjects could control how they were seen. Henry's brief was to allow the subjects to construct *their* own set and to place themselves in the position of their choice. So, our subjects posed for two photos, one at work and the other at home, and each subject was asked to create their own shot by considering the composition of the background, foreground and any props they thought appropriate.

As well as having some control over the composition, subject agency was also emphasised by asking the subjects to review each shot and then reconstruct it if they were unhappy with any

aspect. In addition subject-control was increased as individuals were able to view shots on the digital camera's view-finder immediately after they were taken (Martinsons, 1996) and exercise choice. From the initial preferences of the subjects, several photos were chosen, printed and enlarged for their viewing. The subject was then able to choose their preferences for display.

Along with using the digital camera, photos were taken using only the natural light that was available at the time. The lack of studio lighting naturalised the setting and avoided the subjects feeling as though they were *on stage*. Whether at work or home, the subject chose their own set and position within the photo.

We now discuss the first photographic set of the Legal Secretary to explicate the reading process. We then present four paired sets in their *work* and *home* poses and discuss each in turn, eliciting from them salient features that inform the reading process.

DISCUSSION: THE PHOTOGRAPHS

The photograph of the *Legal Secretary*, at work, is presented below. We see her dressed in a fashionable business suit. On her desk the in-tray, phone and computer screen all speak to her role. As readers, do we take this at face value or do we interrogate the picture so that it yields its deeper meanings? And, what are the tools of such a cross examination? By casting an ironic eye on the photo, it is possible to see a hint of a life beyond her profession. She displays a large posy of flowers – lilies – to express a life outside the rigors of the legal world. Doubt inquires into the nature of that world and to how the other world intersects with the one we see and know.

Photo 1: The Legal secretary, at work



The photo of the secretary at home shows a totally different world. Her home is a yacht. Here she lives unencumbered from the responsibilities of land and house, a life where time is no longer measured for billing. There is time for wine and relaxation. But what of doubt? We are challenged to accept a further view beyond the legal office and the relaxed lifestyle of the marina. At her insistence, the photo was taken with her holding a book. Her intention was to demonstrate that, for her, intellectual engagement is of primary importance, and the light behind her draws the viewer's eye to this central element of her life. As with the flowers in the first shot, the book in this photo challenges us and causes us to doubt our preferred readings; that living on a boat is an *escape from* life rather than an intellectual engagement with life.

Photo 2: The Legal Secretary, at home



Both images are framed in doubt. Which one is the more reliable version of the individual, and what are the constructs the subject has used to frame herself? By taking two shots, doubt, rather than uncertainty is cast on both images.

In asking the subjects to set their own scenes, our intention was to give agency back to the subject of our research. But we wanted to stretch their sense of self-identity by posing the question: in seeing them at work is there any room for ambiguity; a hint that there might be something other to their identity?

We now look at four paired sets of photographs and discuss different aspects of the architecture and reading of the project. We first consider *The Mechanic* and discuss the relationship between caption and images. Then we look at the two photographs of *The Legal Secretary* again, as a paired set, without a caption, and explore how layout determines meaning. In the third set, *The Priest*, we discuss the work that the reader must do to make sense of an image, and the process of re-description that takes place. In the final set of images, *The T-shirt Printer*, we discuss the role of the researcher (in this case, the photographer) within the frame of ironic intention and examine the differences in ironic perception.

Photo Set 1: The Mechanic



In this image set we see the mechanic, framed in the doorway to his business. By choosing to stand beside his sign in the top centre, he invites us into *his* world. We are struck by the chaos in his front yard, but if we read the sign and notice its age, we can infer that he is an old-fashioned mechanic who is well acquainted with motors and how to fix them. We then see him at home and observe similar chaos. Clothes, a bed-head, electronic equipment, are strewn messily all around and over the floor. Many viewers of this image fixate on his untidiness, but alert readers can see he is playing a piano in the background of the picture. With this in mind, we might re-label the photo: *A Portrait of an Artist as a Mechanic*.

Images float: their meanings are polysemic. Labelling images with date, artist, and the title of the work is common in the art world. In the non-art context, labelling, or captioning, is almost inevitable. Barthes has argued that captions pin down an image's meaning and 'anchors' it to a piece of writing (Barthes, 1977). As well as anchoring meaning, text can also amplify its significance (Hall, 1973, cited in Chaplin, 2006). Chaplin (2006) argues captioning is a culturally specific practice, and locates the Western preoccupation with captioning to the scientific revolution, which required image-meanings to depict 'literal truth'. The effect of the caption *The Mechanic* accentuates his occupation: but there is a tension, or doubt, as one toggles around the caption, the mechanic at work and then at home. One can see with the potential re-label (*A Portrait of the Artist as a Mechanic*), how the caption influences how the photos can be read.



The two pictures of the legal secretary are provided again above side-by-side, but this time without a caption. How photographs are arranged on the page (layout) contributes to meaning. Aesthetic decisions become more important in photographic research, and the relationship between image and text can alter meaning. Captions suppress an image's potential polysemy: what was rendered less ambiguous in the first reading of these photographs becomes more ambiguous now. Meaning can float more freely. We know less about this person. Viewers may speculate, then *really* look and think, and ascribe a meaning, even if it is provisional. Without the words, any irony that may be able to be read off the image is less obvious. Ironic intent is no longer overtly signalled. But, the juxtaposition of two contrasting images without text provides a place for re-description; but in this instance it is the reader who re-describes the subject. With the caption, the researcher is inserted more into the image: the *mention* of occupation is clear, and contrasted to the subject at home, who becomes less powerful, and perhaps becomes more of a *victim*. And yet the caption is not explicit, for, by holding the book, the subject takes agency and talks directly to the viewer. The light source in the photograph, a reading lamp, is directly on this knowledge in her hands, but what is the nature of that knowledge? In response, the viewer is left to interpolate a narrative in order to make sense of the photograph.

Photo Set 3: Priest



The priest at work sees her standing in front of the altar. The symmetry is compelling. Her head in the foreground sits neatly in the middle of the organ pipes in the background. She is framed between two candles, and the roof arches above her head drawing the viewer's eye to the crucifix suspended directly above her. The photo is rich in religious symbolism and we are drawn into the liturgical meta-narrative of suffering and redemption. Yet, the priest is clearly female. The viewer is challenged by this contradiction; the inherent instability within the photo of a woman in a man's world. There are no further cues, though, to alert the reader to the theological and sociological problems within the image. The reader must do the work and make sense of these instabilities. In doing so, the reader re-describes his or her reality, and enters into a state of flux, drawn back into the picture again and again, noticing contradictory aspects such as the priest's construction of her home view. The cat, the reflective solitude, allows the reader to create *petit récits* (little stories) about what the pictures might mean.

Photo Set 4: T-Shirt Printer



In this image-set the T-Shirt Printer is first shown with the tools of trade, while at the same time holding his small son. In the next photograph he is pictured in almost exactly the same

pose, but with his partner and all three of his young children in the lounge of his home. We conjecture that he works in a room in his house because his child is so clearly integrated into his workspace. Here the distinctions between work and home converge, blurring the boundaries between the two domains. As with his craft of screen printing which presses ink through a template onto a blank shirt, so too his home life seeps through into his work. The smiles, and postures – of parents embracing their children – reveals a family at ease with the ambiguities of working from home.

Irony can be easily missed, and can equally well be read into an image when none was intended. There is scope for individual differences in perception. We do not believe that any of our subjects were deliberately being ironic, but by presenting themselves as they wished to be perceived, holding next to themselves the things that they love and care about, the dominant discourse of the text is disrupted, and viewers are able to think again about the meaning of their work and its relationship to home identity.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The intention in our modest photographic research project was to create little stories, marked by contrast, aiming to instil doubt. Doubt was built into these photographs through a very simple architecture: the juxtaposition of photographs of people at different places in the work-life spectrum.

We have suggested that much *traditional* management research seeks definitive answers and encourages a final language. Of course, it can be argued that traditional research already invokes doubt in method, and this is true if empirical research is carried out rigorously. In addition, it can be argued that the contestation of knowledge that occurs through the review and publication process ensures that research is sufficiently imbedded in doubt. Yet, at the same time, certainty is often sought before the project is even begun, for instance, in the hypothesis creating process (Blumer, 2006). Furthermore in almost all empirical research, it is the central role of the researcher to create the meaning out of data; to pin it down to some definitive conclusions.

Methods emerging in visual sociology challenge the power of researchers in shaping subjects' realities. This has been accomplished through giving organisational actors themselves the camera to record *their* own realities. This simple shift in agency where the subject is the centre of both the research act and subsequent findings suggests profound implications for researchers. In this project the subject is becoming more of the creator of meaning in research rather than the researcher him- or herself.

These concerns about doubt and power are central in the debate about post-modern research. Holliday argues that:

... discussions of methodology have raised doubts about notions such as objectivity and scientific knowledge, and about the power relationships involved in the research and writing processes, and techniques that one might employ in order to avoid such problems ... Yet the aims of such techniques are misguided if they serve only to further legitimate the *truth* of the research itself.

(Holliday 2000, p. 504, emphasis in the original)

Through the description of our project and by using it to illustrate how irony may be useful methodologically, we hope to provide a method by which arts-based techniques could be fostered. Our aim has been to de-mystify arts-based research by presenting a project that uses photography as its medium to present *small stories* about its subjects' multiple identities. By locating this project within a methodological context our aim has been to contribute to the growing canon of research methods sympathetic to artistic engagement.

In a final point of reflection on our project we would like to raise the issue of management education. What can an arts-based approach to education actually offer management researchers and educators? And why is it important to integrate emerging artistic approaches to researching management issues, with teaching and learning philosophies?

In writing about iconography, (Mitchell, 1987) argues that the educated perceiver is cognisant of structural elements and that within a painting there is the 'artful planting of certain clues' (p. 41) placed there by the artist with which the perceiver can interact. The perceiver's role is to make coherent meaning of the evident, as well as the implied invisible elements within the painting. Further, Mitchell claims paradoxically that 'we can never understand a picture unless we grasp the ways in which it shows what cannot be seen' (p. 39). Within a work of art, then, there are both explicit and implicit ideas that perceivers connect with in order to make sense of the piece. Therefore, 'the innocent eye is blind' and if our 'eye' is not educated first, then we will not fully see what is there (p. 38).

So, here is the heart of the problem that arts-based research seeks to address, namely, the developing education of the perceiver so that the invisible become visible. This process, though, necessitates a connection developing with the author, a relationship that calls into question Barthes' proclamation that the author is dead and that 'a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its *destination*' (Barthes, 1977, p. 148, emphasis added). In this regard Harper notes that:

... visual sociology offer[s] the opportunity to address the post-modern critiques of ethnography and documentary photography and, in so doing, to fashion a new method based on the understanding of the social construction of the image and the need for collaboration between the subject and the photographer.

(Harper, 2005, p. 747)

Our paper attempts to close the gap between artistic and management disciplines. Management researchers could usefully employ artistic techniques and rhetorical devices to create their explorations of organisational life and communicate their vision more effectively to their audiences. Furthermore, as artistic approaches become more prevalent educationalists will be able to more fully engage with artistic practices and teach students how to read art. This call has been echoed recently in a number of places, including Daniel Pink's (2004) proclamation that the MFA graduates (Master of Fine Arts) are more eagerly sought by the business community than those with a traditional MBA. Further, Nancy Adler demonstrates how a successful transition from traditional management education to arts-based learning can occur. As both an organisational scholar and practicing artist, Adler works seamlessly in both areas. Based on these life experiences she advocates for educational practices that integrate imagination and innovation from the arts into executive education (Adler, 2006), and in so doing, transform leaders into more creative thinkers.

In conclusion, we have illustrated our argument by reflecting on a recent photographic research project which was a collaborative effort between management researchers and an artist. We show how the simple architecture of this project was built from irony, a language of doubt that encourages readers to engage in re-description of their *petit récits* – small stories, told through photographs. Drawing on some recent writing on qualitative methods, and particularly arts-based and visual research methodologies, we have shown how an artistic approach can be used to complement existing research concerns, and we have illustrated how this can be achieved. Finally, we have argued that management educators need to introduce the language of art into business programmes, thereby enriching the curriculum and equipping students with a raft of tools to assist them become creative leaders.

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