



## Visual organizing: Balancing coordination and creative freedom via mood boards☆



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### ABSTRACT

How is organizing accomplished in contexts that require coordination to be balanced with creative freedom? The paper addresses this question by building on literature that highlights the active role of objects in coordination and organizing processes as well as the recent turn to visual objects in organization studies. Using empirical data from a design process in artistic perfumery, the paper shows how independent actors and their sub-products are coordinated by means of a visual mood board that is able to maintain plurality while also having a directing and aligning effect. We discuss the potential of mood boards as an example of the wider phenomenon of aesthetic objects, connecting senses and emotion and providing a link across people in the creative industries and elsewhere.

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### 1. Introduction

How people coordinate and align sub-products in new product development processes has been the object of sustained interest (Bechky, 2003; Carlile, 2002, 2004; Okhuysen & Bechky, 2009 for overview). As new products are increasingly distinguished by their aesthetics and design (Postrel, 2003), product development processes focus on innovation and creativity, often involving professionals from creative backgrounds, such as designers (Reckwitz, 2012). However, current literature suggests that managing creative professionals requires new forms of organizing (e.g., Gotsi, Andriopoulos, Lewis, & Ingram, 2010). For example, Kellogg, Orlikowski, and Yates (2006) show that creative workers are likely to resist coordination mechanisms that engineers or customer service representatives readily accept. Elsbach (2009) points out that designers value opportunities for expressing signature styles, and Florida (2002) describes autonomy and self-expression as core values of creative workers. Managing creative workers and creative work as such therefore

poses important challenges for management (DeFillippi, Grabher, & Jones, 2007), such as how to organize product development processes to balance the need for integration and coordination with the imperatives of creativity and autonomy (Cohendet & Simon, 2007; Florida, 2002). The tension between these two requirements can be felt particularly strongly in product development processes in temporary (Bechky, 2006) or latent organizations (Starkey, Barnatt, & Tempest, 2000), where networks of loosely coupled actors work independently to accomplish specific tasks.

This paper tries to understand the challenge of managing creative workers by examining the micro-processes of organizing in new product development in the creative industries. More specifically, it focuses on the development of a new signature perfume by the German label Humiecki & Graef (H&G). H&G is part of an emerging niche market known as artistic perfumery, characterized by experimental and highly innovative fragrances. The development process at H&G involves five different, semi-autonomous groups of actors (creative director, perfumers, photographer, packaging designer, writer), coordinated largely via a means of a visual object that represents a mood board. Owing to its affordances, the mood board helps narrow the array of creative possibilities and align the sub-products while opening space for creative autonomy, flexibility, and self-expression. Coordinating via mood board thus balances the seemingly contradictory exigencies of organizing creative people and creative work (e.g., DeFillippi et al., 2007; Gotsi et al., 2010).

The paper contributes to an understanding of how visual and material artifacts support creativity and coordination in the creative

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industries. Increasing interest in the role of objects in coordination (Okhuysen & Bechky, 2009) and the recent turn to the visual dimension of organizing (Meyer, Höllerer, Jancsary, & van Leeuwen, 2013) provide the theoretical backdrop for this study. While past research focused on formal coordination mechanisms such as hierarchy or rules, attention is increasingly turning to emergent (Jarzabkowski, Le & Feldman, 2012; Kellogg et al., 2006) and materially mediated coordination mechanisms (Bechky, 2003; Carlile, 2002, 2004; Ewenstein & Whyte, 2009; Henderson, 1991). The empirical data illustrate how mood boards, as a visual expression of intangible qualities (e.g., an idea or vision for a new product), depart from formal coordination mechanisms by allowing for autonomy while expressing a shared aesthetic vision. Visual objects provide explanatory value for managing creative workers, emphasizing the role of visual objects in coordination (e.g., Okhuysen & Bechky, 2009), and adding to the visual turn in management and organization studies (Bell & Davison, 2013; Bell, Warren, Schroeder, & Warren, 2013; Meyer et al., 2013). The findings and its implications are discussed and the potential of visual organizing for sectors marked by creative, aesthetic, or emotional features is outlined.

## 2. Coordination and creativity as material processes

### 2.1. Coordination and creativity

Recent work on management in the creative industries has pointed to tensions that exist in the quandary of coordination versus creativity (e.g., DeFillippi et al., 2007; Florida, 2002; Lampel, Lant, & Shamsie, 2000). Particularly, creative production involves both processes of differentiation, whereby creative producers manage sub-products with relative creative autonomy, and integration, whereby sub-products must cohere with a common aesthetic vision (e.g., Nandhakumar, Panourgias, & Scarbrough, 2013).

Creative workers may resist coordination attempts, viewing them as controlling, managerialist, or constraining their artistic expression (e.g., Hackley & Kover, 2007; Kellogg et al., 2006). According to Lampel et al. (2000), such tensions, while common to many, if not most professions, are particularly acute in the creative industries, which are characterized simultaneously by a strong bias for autonomy and the need for creative coherence in product design.

Addressing the challenge of managing creative workers, Gotsi et al. (2010) outline strategies to balance creative workers' fractious identity processes from creating hierarchies, to defining employees' roles, to establishing the "rules of the game". They emphasize identity work relating to paradoxical roles and the creation of abstract meta-identities facilitating simultaneous senses of togetherness and autonomy. Other treatments of managing creatives (e.g., Eikhof & Haunschild, 2007) emphasize individualized practices of employee management to negotiate tensions between creative and managerial requirements. Within a theater context, individualized management allowed directors to counterbalance art and commerce demands, minimizing standardized HRM practices and emphasizing idiosyncratic practices (e.g., one-on-one talks) adapted to individual actors. Such practices, although time consuming, enhanced actors' motivation and strengthened personal relationships, providing a space to reconcile economic logics and artistic requirements. Similarly, Cohendet and Simon (2007) focus on the exploration-exploitation tension in videogame development, where creativity and artistic expression are balanced with the economic constraints of mass entertainment. Such balancing led to a hybrid management form, with decentralized platforms to support informal interactions, creative slack and distance from evaluation, yet also ensuring control through strict time constraints.

Importantly, these studies focus on relational or structural aspects of management, on relating *interpersonally* with creative workers or instituting policies to manage tensions. Such studies can be complemented by emerging literature suggesting that *material* artifacts can be instrumental in structuring coordination and creating spaces for creativity.

Creative workers often rely on material supports for their work, from charts to drawings to electronic technologies, and their work is largely formed in relation to these supports (e.g., Ewenstein & Whyte, 2009; Henderson, 1991; Stigliani & Ravasi, 2012). By focusing on how creative workers use key material artifacts, the paper explores how tensions may be mediated, providing a new perspective to the challenge of coordinating creativity.

### 2.2. Coordination by objects

Scholars have ascribed increasing importance to materiality and material objects in supporting organizing processes from the role of PowerPoint for strategy making (Kaplan, 2011), Gantt charts for managing time (Yakura, 2002), photocopiers for organizational positioning (Suchman, 2007), or text and memos for coordination and control purposes (Yates, 1985). Within the creative industries, the role of objects has been acknowledged for facilitating career boundary transitions (Jones, 2010), for mediating between creative and business demands (Lampel & Mustafa, 2009), and for facilitating collective sensemaking in design processes (Stigliani & Ravasi, 2012). In each of these cases, objects work to consolidate narratives among producers and to coordinate across boundaries, with scholars in the area invoking the now well-studied concept of boundary objects (Star & Griesemer, 1989) for theoretical support.

Building upon studies of objects in scientific work (Latour, 1987), organizational scholars note that knowledge is embedded in material practices and that objects communicate both technical and social qualities (Star & Griesemer, 1989), providing information and offering common points of reference, two cognitive functions generally considered important for coordinating actors (Okhuysen & Bechky, 2009: 474).

While objects in such coordination settings include drawings, prototypes, or machines (e.g., Bechky, 2003; Carlile, 2002, 2004), few authors explicitly address the visual affordances of these objects, that is, the possibilities for action given by a particular instrument or sensory modality (Gibson, 1979). A rare exception, Henderson (1991) emphasizes visual qualities in her study of design engineers. She notes the pervasive use of drawings, sketches, and visual representations, used to communicate, discuss, and negotiate knowledge and ideas during the design and production process.

Coordination and conflict take place over, on, and through the drawings. These visual representations shape the structure of the work ... They are a component of the social organization of collective cognition and the locus for practice-situated and practice-generated knowledge (Henderson, 1991: 449).

Similarly, Ewenstein and Whyte (2009) illustrate the central role of visual representations in architectural practice. The visual representation of the product is seen to mediate and initiate coordination and dialogical processes in which knowledge is shared and reflected.

Current literature on objects in coordination focuses on the rather technical nature of objects and visual representations (e.g., drawings, sketches, prototypes, machines, documentation). They symbolically depict or represent the elements of a new turbine engine (Henderson, 1991), a building, roof, or car park (Ewenstein & Whyte, 2009), valves for automobile fuel systems (Carlile, 2002, 2004), or a semiconductor (Bechky, 2003). Perhaps because of its roots in science and technology studies, the role of objects as technical supports has been the primary target of interest. Recently, however, objects have been recognized as also facilitating *emotional* or *sensory* processes, largely through their ability to ground narratives (e.g., Lampel & Mustafa, 2012, on perfumery). While such perspectives have not focused on visibility per se, they open new vistas for research into the material affordances of objects.

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