Brigitte Biehl-Missal¹

Aesthetics and organization: studying interaction and resistance

Abstract

Contemporary aesthetic theory has informed research on management, leading to the emergence of a research field "organisational aesthetics". Emphasizing the aesthetic nature of organisations, it challenges traditional positivist and quantitative management views. This essay sketches the development of the field that started with the use of art metaphors as heuristic instruments (organizations as theatre, jazz band, dance). This led to the exploration of actual aesthetic interactions in organizational, marketing, and leadership situations. Management research has benefited from an aesthetic perspective which opened up many opportunities to analyse interaction and resistance that take place on the sensual dimension, and not on the rational sphere of an organization. In the most recent step, aesthetic methods for research and the presentation of findings have been introduced and are being deployed. As a future perspective, research may become more even aesthetic also in method and form to open up new ways to interactively negotiate meaning and impact.

Keywords Aesthetics, Management, Organization

1. The foundations of organizational aesthetics research

The aesthetic perspective in management research has been influenced by the publication of works in philosophy, including for example Wolfgang Welsch (1996) and Gernot Böhme (2003) who have spoken at some length about the "sensual" constitution of the economic, social and interpersonal dimensions of contemporary Western

¹ brigitte.biehl@srh.de.

capitalism, the "aesthetic economy". Böhme (1993, 1995, 2003) writes about a "new aesthetics" that is not a theory of art or the works of art but accounts for actual developments in the world of management and marketing and re-evaluates the relationship between aesthetics and the economy. The "new aesthetics" differs from traditional aesthetics which was developed in the 18th century as a theory of art or of the work of art, typically concerned with aesthetic judgements and categories such as the beauty or the sublime. The function of traditional aesthetics to facilitate conversation about works of art has led to a dominance of language and semiotics, at the expense of aesthetic presence and atmosphere of an art work. With regard to the increased aestheticization of the economy – including impressive marketing and corporate architectures, visual forms of expression in advertising, sonic atmospheres in retail spaces and as a feature of products and audio brands – the task of the researchers is not to deal with only the fine arts but to make the broad range of aesthetic reality transparent and open to critical analysis (Böhme 1993: 114).

Researchers in organization and management studies and marketing concur with this view and have explored the aesthetic dimension of these worlds as well. Challenging much of the positivist tradition in management and organisational research, the interdisciplinary field of "organisational aesthetics" (Taylor, Hansen 2005; Strati 1999; Linstead, Höpfl, 2000), or *Wirtschaftsästhetik* in German (Biehl-Missal 2011b), suggests a strong qualitative and interpretative approach to organisations, emphasizing aesthetics in the sense of sensual perception. In focusing on the aesthetic perception, this links to the works of Gernot Böhme (1993) who has applied the view on aesthetics as sensual perception to the analysis of the world beyond the arts and the entire contemporary economy.

The notion of "aesthetics" is in colloquial language often used to refer to someone or something that is "beautiful". However, as also management scholars have learned, "the beautiful" is just one of several aesthetic categories that commonly are used the discourse in the art world, such as "the ugly", "the comic", "the grotesque", "the sublime" et cetera (Strati 1999). These words all refer to some kind of judgment that relates to the form, the sensory nature and appearance of things. Such an understanding of aesthetics is useful beyond the art world: aesthetics has the Greek root aisth with the verb aisthánesthai, which refers to corporeal perception that leads to a

certain form of knowing. The notion of aesthetics in contemporary philosophy and in organization studies is mostly used in the sense of *aisthesis* and is concerned with the sensual perception of reality, not primarily the fine arts. Whilst an aesthetics, which is a theory of art or of the work of art, is not able to more encompassing analyses, *aisthesis* opens the broad range of contemporary aesthetic reality to analysis (Böhme 1995: 125).

This view has been developed by management and organizational researchers. The general surge of aesthetics into organizational studies is driven by the search for alternate methods of knowledge creation following constructivist views and the postmodern "crisis of representation" in organizational research (Taylor, Hansen 2005). Foregoing the positivist mind-body separation and its logico-deductive thinking, this stream of management research draws on interpretive and critical perspectives, claiming that knowledge is strongly influenced by feelings and sensual, embodied perception. Organisations are not judged in terms of "beauty" but with reference to all aesthetic categories including the comic, the tragic and the ugly. This continues Michael Polanyi's (1958, reprinted in 1978) idea of tacit knowledge that roughly corresponds to sensory/aesthetic knowing that often is contrasted with intellectual/explicit knowing. This reflects philosophical conceptions of aesthetics that go beyond artistic judgment in a Kantian sense, focusing on a fundamental access to the sensuous nature of human experience. Such an epistemology is an anathema for mainstream management writing that claims to operate from a normative position of truth, which it controls and manages.

Organisations have already before these initiatives been considered in terms of "aesthetics" from the perspective of Gestalt theory. For more than 90 years now, Gestalt psychologists have emphasised the sensual perception and the aesthetic dimension of organisations in organisations — a tradition that was discontinued with the second World War. For example, it was Kurt Lewin who linked Gestalt theoretical thinking to the psychology of small and large groups, formal and informal organisations and the cultural and social climate as a whole; other examples relate to the presencing and learning through insights that also goes back to German psychologists Wolfgang Köhler (1921/63) and Karl Duncker (Biehl-Missal, Fitzek, 2014). Today, these Gestalt theory approaches are often forgotten but live on in the application of specific knowledge to processes of organisational change

and management development that are largely influenced by these complex aesthetic and psychological factors. An example are arts-based interventions such as psychological art coaching initiatives (Fitzek 2013).

The heritage of Gestalt theory remains largely ignored in contemporary management research that has evolved its own interest in aesthetics. For the past three decades, organisation and management studies have exhibited an increasing awareness of the sensually perceivable and "aesthetic" dimension of people's existence in organisations. Previously, management studies had for a long time almost exclusively focused on the instrumental sphere of work, emphasising concepts of scientific management and rational organisation. Works often cited as starting points towards an extended view are Weick's (1969) *Social psychology of organizing* and Silverman's sociological (1970) *Theory of organizations*.

Applied to organisations, an extended notion of tacit knowledge or aesthetic knowing means to analyse how people sensually perceive spaces, relations, interactions, imagery and atmospheres, exploring how they use their five classic senses of vision (sight), audition (hearing), tactile stimulation (touch), olfaction (smell), and gustation (taste), and their general response to situations. This approach accounts for contemporary developments of organizational life. Briefly summarized, this development goes beyond Douglas Mc Gregor's classic Theory X (workers are "economic men" and motivated by financial rewards) towards the Theory Y of the "self-actualizing man" and complex assumptions and human resource management that came to consider humane capacities, knowledge and motivation. Today we take for granted that through work positive emotional rewards and self-fulfilment can be achieved or is at least sought for. This is particularly evident in areas such as arts and the creative industries and many other professions where people put money second and focus on values that are important for creative workers and generally include autonomy, flexibility in work schedules and the development of personal work responsibilities, as well as peer recognition as a motivator (Florida 2012: 74). Samantha Warren thus has explored in organizations the question about "how it feels to work" (2008, emphasis added). Many influences are not only rationally explainable but rather of aesthetic nature, including the design of the work spaces and the atmosphere among team members, and influence how work is perceived and executed.

In the organizational and management field, a range of publications have formed the basis of an ever-growing field of organisational aesthetics research (Strati 1999; Linstead, Höpfl 2000; Carr, Hancock 2003; Taylor, Hansen 2005), as did conference series (The Art of Management and Organisation conference AoMO; The Standing Conference on Organisational Symbolism SCOS), and special issues in management journals. Meanwhile, we have seen the emergence of specialised journals such as *Organizational aesthetics* (Taylor *et al.* 2012). The aesthetic approach assembles works that draw on philosophy, cultural studies, theatre, film and media studies, architecture, aesthetics, psychology and many more, and also includes a range of radical traditions within the social sciences, including critical theory, poststructuralism and postmodernism.

The aesthetic approach has then also been recognised in management handbooks as well, for example the *Sage handbook of new approaches in management and organization* (Barry, Hansen 2008). In Germany research in this area is quite young and was largely inhibited and misunderstood by a positivist mainstream business studies tradition of German *Betriebswirtschaftslehre* (Biehl-Missal 2011b) that is less open to interdisciplinary research than, for example, international business schools. British business schools have a comparably larger proportion of scholars that come from the humanities or sociology – who have introduced their methods and approaches that often are qualitative and include aesthetic considerations, and also have brought with them critical theory (Rowlinson, Hassard, 2011).

A critical stance helps to access contemporary processes of aestheticization in organizations. Management practice traditionally revolves around control over people in order to plan and execute work, and this continues on today's times in contemporary organizations on a less obvious level than in a Fordist organisation with standardized production. In the context of the aesthetic nature of work, organisational aesthetics research has problematized manifold attempts of new forms of control in organisations that may not be visible, but operate on the visceral and subconscious level through sensual and implicit manipulation via architectures, atmospheres, narratives and manifold pressures to perform (Warren, Rehn 2006). The aesthetic dimension entails manifold issues of control as well as of resistance (Biehl-Missal 2011a, 2011b). The aesthetic level, albeit often invisible, performative, transitory and ephemeral, has been recognized as a

sphere in which people in organizations vividly negotiate their work and existence.

2. Art metaphors in organizational research

Responding to calls for new creative, innovative and sustainable approaches to management in the 21st century (Adler 2006), scholars have argued for an aesthetic sensibility towards manifold material forms and interpersonal aesthetic relations in organisations. It can be asserted that organisational life largely depends on sensual perception and aesthetic, implicit and tacit elements that hold together what participants and stakeholders perceive as organisational reality (Biehl-Missal 2011b: 20). Before this has been discussed in greater depth in organizational aesthetics, aesthetic inquiry in a first step has applied a range of metaphors from the world of arts to describe organisations in new ways. Art metaphors have been used as a heuristic tool to analyse new forms of management and organizing that go beyond merely rationalist thinking as explicated in the Scientific Management view, and include artistic and aesthetic analogies.

For more than 40 years now, art metaphors have been used by researchers and practitioners to understand organisations in new ways. Certain times have called for specific metaphors on organisations. For example, the metaphor of the organisation as a "machine" is representative of the times of Scientific Management. The application of the metaphor of the machine for the organisation suggests that employees function like "gear wheels" in a large, hierarchical system in which the output can be optimized by using some sort of "leverage" and by raising the "pressure". Employees are likened to mechanical parts with specific functions and skills, being replaceable and to be exchanged when "broken". In this view, rationality is the basis for making decisions, and emotions, relationships and subjectivity of individuals seem to be of no relevance.

In the 1980s, in academic research the theatre metaphor emerged: organisations have been likened to theatres ("organisations as theatre", Mangham, Overington, 1987) to emphasise issues such as role playing and performing, when people stick to a "script", present themselves and their services as if they were on a "stage" in front of customers, their colleagues and their bosses. They perform, show emotions, and act to a script. Sometimes they improvise, but always

try to manage their impressions – as it has already been explained by the sociologist Erving Goffman (1959) with regard to the presentation of self in everyday life. This metaphor resonates very much with service-oriented organisations, including gastronomy, events, the advertising industry, education, the health care sector and others. This view values performative, theatrical and emotional aspects over rational and scientific underpinnings of organisational life.

In contrast to previous approaches that hardly capture the subjective and dynamic nature of organisational life and what is going on between people, such a metaphorical perspective is a bridge to the analysis of aesthetically mediated interaction in real life. The theatre directors collective Rimini Protokoll has in this vein declared the Daimler annual shareholder meeting a "theatre performance" and has visited the large event with 200 theatre spectators of the Berliner HAU Theater. They made visible the staging of the reality and the reality of the staging (Inszenierung der Wirklichkeit und Wirklichkeit der Inszenierung, Biehl-Missal 2012). With this artistic framing they opened the event for an aesthetic analysis beyond the world of theatre to capture the aesthetics of contemporary life (Böhme 1993: 125). The theatre perspective has developed beyond a mere re-labeling of organisational practice "as" theatre to address the fact that interactions are co-created aesthetic experiences which are constantly challenged and negotiated, with not only persuasion but resistance as well (Biehl-Missal 2011a). In these settings, corporate managers use theatrical techniques such as high stages, bright light and dynamic stage design to persuade audiences to and convey an impression of success, impeccability and economic vision. Audiences such as critical shareholders and often even pension funds seize their right to ask questions and contradict and challenge managerial views, often supported by applause and booing of the large audiences. This shows that the aesthetic dimension is the realm in which a large potential of organisational power resides and is at the same time contested and challenged by those who are exposed to these aesthetic practices.

Other researchers have compared organisations to jazz bands (e.g. Weick 1998) to highlight new forms of improvisation and shared leadership that do not only depend on rational understanding but relate to many body-based factors and non-verbal, aesthetic forms of communication and knowing. Jazz bands improvise, communicate non-verbally, and "swing" or "flow". Experiencing the live performances of jazz bands creates some aesthetic knowing about musi-

cians' interaction, researchers "feel" the process as the audience members do. The value of this metaphor is that it sheds new light on how improvisation works and how decision-making might be less regulated and more free-flowing than traditional managerialist approaches (Barrett 2000). The reflective research process enhanced leadership theory: leadership is not a static position, but something that is shared, not static, and consisting of an interplay of leading and support. Power is negotiated and shared in the aesthetic interaction, through gaze, gestures, rhythm changes and through empathy of the team players.

The most recent of art metaphors is the dance metaphor which has in the beginning been more loosely applied when businesses appeared to be "like a dance" with corporate change processes that require the ability to learn new "steps" and to "adapt attitudes". The metaphor was expanded considerably and made much more interesting by referring in more detailed ways to dance theory and practice in form of actual dance movements and also modern dance that, when applied by individuals, can help choreographing creative processes for innovation in organizations (Bozic Yams 2016). Such a view on dance can hence help us to make sense of dynamic forms of human interaction in organizations, pointing to the relevance of bodily movement that creates invisible but durable "choreographies" in organizations, that defines and delimits gender performance, and that is able to explore non-verbal but aesthetic processes of leading and following (Biehl 2017). This aesthetic perspective illustrates that organizations not only consist of by rational and formal structures. Rather they are created on the aesthetic and kinaesthetic (movementrelated) dimension where interaction, space and power is negotiated by moving individuals, and eventually inscribed into peoples' bodies and aesthetic knowing.

This brief review of art metaphors in organizational research has pointed to the development of aesthetic research into organizations: namely engaging in many opportunities for concrete aesthetic analysis beyond the metaphor. These perspectives include the aesthetic activities of managers who in this context have been metaphorically linked to all kinds of artists, from sculptors to painters and actors (Taylor, Hansen 2005: 1219). These early observations of managers' or leaders' aesthetic actions reach far beyond standardised rational routines of managing. They include practices of aesthetic interaction or "aesthetic work" in organizations.

3. Aesthetic phenomena in organizations

3.1 Atmospheres

Organizational and marketing research has used an aesthetic perspective also to explore products and services. Many of these are driven by the aesthetic experience as contemporary consumption extends beyond the acquisition and use of goods and involves important "experiences" by consumers (Holbrook, Hirschman 1982). In this context, researchers have linked their analyses to the "new aesthetics" that is concerned with aisthesis, i.e. the sensual perception of the reality and addresses the relation between environmental qualities and human states in actual aesthetic environments (Böhme 1993: 125). The key notion of "atmosphere" has received some attention in the discipline of aesthetics within philosophy, for example with Herrmann Schmitz, and can also be encountered in marketing research. People perceive and absorb the atmosphere in bodily ways, when smelling odor, which enters the body directly; feeling musical rhythm, which vibrates and affects bodily tensions; or seeing colours that hurt the eves.

In this context, a philosophical notion of the atmosphere has been applied in organizational research: atmosphere is something that is, in a certain sense, indeterminate, a spatially extended quality of feeling; atmospheres are considered spatial bearers of moods, created by a range of different elements: "atmospheres are evidently what are experienced in bodily presence in relation to persons and things or in spaces" (Böhme 1993: 119). The notion of the atmosphere helps to explain corporeal and emotional responses in carefully designed environments, be it in organizational or consumption spaces, settings and interpersonal interactions.

The atmosphere of organizational spaces (Gagliardi 1990), work spaces and consumption spaces as well has become an important area of researcher inquiry. It includes shopping malls, a variety of stores, and other products of "aesthetic work" (Böhme 1993) that serve to influence how people feel in the spaces and — e.g. in shopping malls — to further intensify people's desire for consumption. This also extends back to the arts world, when considering that there is a creative circuit between department stores and museums (Biehl-Missal, vom Lehn 2015): museums of all kinds have adapted marketing practices to spaces that generate persuasive aesthetic atmos-

pheres and organizational spaces have adapted presentation strategies known from the world of museums.

Consumer research has acknowledged that consumers' experiences involve further aesthetic encounters and responses, many of which are stimulated by aspects of the retail environment such as store design, events and entertainment (Turley, Milliman 2000). Philosophical perspectives have also remarked that these atmospheres include sensual perception within the context of elaborate and "seductive" store designs (Böhme 2006: 152). Marketers employ aesthetic techniques of lighting, staging and decorating in order to create sophisticated atmospheres for shopping which have become sites for various embodied experiences.

While many analyses aim to improve the effectiveness of marketing strategies by increasing people's inclination to consume, the introduction of an aesthetic approach to the macromarketing debate served as a critical response to the commercial use of aesthetic marketing practices (Biehl-Missal, Saren, 2012). In common with other works, the prefix "critical" signals that the perspective subscribes to Frankfurt School Critical Theory and serves to highlight the potentially manipulative character of actual aesthetic developments: the analysis of a Starbucks shop for example shows how different features play together to create an enjoyable atmosphere, a romantic idealized reality of its own, which differs from the contested corporate reality and its less harmonious interaction with other groups of stakeholders, including critics. More generally, in a continuation of Critical Theory, "such atmospheres can be considered as instruments for mass manipulation which do not offer people a space to develop sensuality and thinking, but aim to intensify rather than satisfy people's desire to consume, turning consumption into an obligation and strengthening an economy which is based on the exploitation of labor and consumption alike" (Biehl-Missal, Saren 2012: 176).

Aesthetic marketing research here links to Böhme's (2003: 80) "new aesthetics" for example, which states that aesthetic work "may well serve the intensification of life, but [...] should not make us forget that society is neither just imaginary [...], but ultimately still rests on relations of violence". Indeed, the atmosphere is created by the corporate staging of the space, but people still negotiate, resist and co-create these atmospheres. Activist have invaded corporate spaces for their performances and political demonstrations (Perucci 2008), as they also realize that the realm of the aesthetic is more powerful

for creating and transporting messages than any lengthy press release or written statement. This idea of interaction, negotiation and resistance on the dimension of the aesthetic has been further pursued in management research.

3.2 Leadership

Along with the development of the aesthetic perspective, scholars have started to explore the "aesthetics of leadership" as an important but little understood aspect of organizational life. Hansen, Ropo and Sauer (2007) built on the view of aesthetics relating to felt meaning generated from sensory perceptions, and the central role of subjective, tacit knowledge rooted in feeling and emotion. This opens the door to analyse how leadership is created and produced, including how followers of leaders themselves do not play a passive part (as in classical management models) but exert social influence in this process.

The aesthetic view continues consideration of interaction and resistance on the sensual level and emphasises the role of the followers in a leadership interaction and the fact that leadership is not an object pertaining to a powerful person. This has been quite a step for leadership research that historically was very hierarchical and bureaucratic and perceived of leadership as "something" that a powerful person holds, neglecting many social influences and relations (Uhl-Bien et al. 2014). Rather, leadership is seen as created in a process between leaders and followers with an "in-between" space connecting leaders and followers particularly through their bodily presence (Ladkin 2013). Whilst in the mechanical image of the "organization as a machine", the leader is in direct connection, pushing or pulling the follower elements - other views such as "dance" show a space inbetween leaders and followers. In dance, leadership is created through aesthetic and kinaesthetic (movement-related) perception (Ropo, Sauer 2008), emphasising the relational dimension of leadership and followership.

Studies have increasingly looked into the aesthetic processes involved, for example, in the interaction between a conductor and an orchestra that can be transferred onto organisational leadership: leadership is described as an ongoing relational process between the conductor and the musicians in which conductors deploy relational listening, aesthetic judgment and kinaesthetic empathy to interact with the orchestra (Koivunen, Wennes 2011). Another example is the

aesthetic analysis of techno DJs which use their kinaesthetic empathic to not only act upon, but react to the dancing crowd, constantly using non-verbal body movements to create an energetic and uplifting atmosphere and to "move" people in space and time (Biehl 2019). Followers could also not move and leave, which would be obvious resistance. Most of them stay and influence the dance situation through their body movement, whistling, clapping, gestures and energy. In this view, the roles of leading and following are co-created and reversible and leadership emerges in-between participants through aesthetic work.

This changes how we conceive of leadership. Leadership does not pertain to one or the other, to either leader of follower, but in embodied interaction is co-created through aesthetic perception. Organizational research has benefited from such an aesthetic perspective inspired by philosophical research which opens up many opportunities for exploring interaction and resistance that have not been elaborated on in traditional business studies.

3.3 Arts-based methods

Decades of research on aesthetic phenomena in management and organisations have moved beyond the metaphor of organizations "as" theatres and managers "as" artists, and led to an increasing emphasis on the actual aesthetic situation that is co-created and negotiated by subtle and intricate processes of people in space and time. In present times, aesthetic techniques revolving around music, theatre and dance have developed out of metaphorical theory building and are being deployed for organizational development and training.

In this context, we are witnessing a growing practical use of theatre, sculpture, music and dance for organisational change and employee and leadership development (Berthoin Antal, Strauß 2013). So-called artistic interventions bring people, processes and products of the world of arts into organizations to work on issues employees and businesses are facing (Berthoin Antal 2009). These methods help to see things new and differently, open up perspectives for individuals and at the same time are an opportunity for participants to negotiate meanings and address topics. However, these methods such as organizational theatre can also be a contested field of managerial power and failed resistance by employees who are forced to take part and to perform with a submissive smile (Evers, Lempa 2017)

While a systematic review of the application of aesthetic methods has started around 15 years ago (Darsø 2004), aesthetic practice is increasingly seen as an inspiration and useful tool and has infused management education and practice (Seifter, Buswick 2010; Biehl-Missal 2011b). These practices again have been analysed for manipulation and resistance, with organizational theatre framed in terms of "forced participation" and an aesthetic tool for employee oppression (Lempa, Lewandowska 2016). With an increasing aestheticization not only of the economy as such, but also of organizational life, leadership and marketing, further analyses are needed to critically dissect and oppose these developments.

4. Conclusion and aesthetic research methods as future perspectives

This development of aesthetic practice leads us to the question in which form the findings of academic research, and also critical research, can be made more relevant in today's aesthetic era. A way forward could be in the actual application of aesthetic forms not only to generate research data but also to transmit research findings to audience in a more holistic way, not only communicating in text and prose, but addressing embodied knowing through artistic forms. So far aesthetic methods such as poetry (Darmer 2006), theatre and dance have been used to communicate within academia and to other stakeholders.

In the area new methodology, dance for example, has been employed to generate data and to represent research findings in a more aesthetic way (Leavy 2009). The body is viewed as an experiential repository for what we "know", which may not only emerge through aesthetic methods such as dance, crafts and painting, but can also be enhanced through being exposed to an aesthetic form of communication. In this context suggestions have been made to use aesthetic, arts-based forms of research and writing (Biehl-Missal 2015) that try to address body-based, sometimes invisible, and transitory experiences and judgments. However, researchers who have used arts such as fabrics to illustrate their research process and findings have been ridiculed and not taken seriously because methods were seen as "feminine" and not "hard enough" (Rippin 2006).

Again, it continues to be difficult in mainstream management and organization studies to legitimate aesthetic studies as they are often

seen as not "clear" and "objective". Despite the pervasive aestheticization of the economy and the broad range of aesthetic experiences that are being sold and offered around the globe, research in the area of management has proven a remarkable retardedness. The aesthetic perspective to organizations has been acknowledged in mainstream but is not mainstream. It still has to struggle in this positivist field where journals favour quantitative analyses, "hard" data and uninspired forms of academic writing (Phillips *et al.* 2014).

However, more openness is needed to apply aesthetic analyses to account for aesthetic developments in the economy, looking into atmospheric, transitory, non-verbal and often invisible spaces inbetween people and things. In this spirit there is still a lot to achieve in the area of aesthetic research and the use of arts-based research methods to generate and transmit findings. Research findings could increasingly be presented in more aesthetic ways such as theatre plays (Taylor 2018) or interactive dance workshops (Kolo 2016) that makes stakeholders "feel the data". This aims to generate some aesthetic knowing to further a potential of reflective critique and possibly active resistance to oppressive developments. Research may become more "aesthetic" not only in content, but in method and form as well to act as a cultural and aesthetic force, to open up new ways to interactively negotiate meaning and, potentially, move people in organization studies and in organizations in new ways.

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Brigitte Biehl-Missal, Aesthetics and organization

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Brigitte Biehl-Missal, Aesthetics and organization

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