



Collective Virtuosity: An Aesthetic Experience in Groups

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MARK MAROTTO*
Research Associate

DR JOHAN ROOS*
Director

DR BART VICTOR**
Professor

*Imagination Lab Foundation - Rue Marterey 5 - 1005 Lausanne - Switzerland
Tel +41 21 321 55 44 - Fax +41 21 321 55 45 - www.imagilab.org

** Vanderbilt University – 401 21st Avenue South – Nashville – TN 37203
Tel + 1 800 288 6936 – Fax + 1 615 343 1175 – bart.victor@vanderbilt.edu

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ABSTRACT

Collective virtuosity is the aesthetic experience in a group that is transformed by its own performance. The aesthetic experience is the highly emotional and intellectual encounter with beauty, as is often the case with art. People typically report feelings of timelessness and flow, and are passionately engaged in the art object. We argue that group members are transformed not only by their task, but also by each other's highly skilled and authentic performance of that task, that is, virtuosity. In certain groups, everyone is simultaneously performer and audience, thus virtuosity becomes *collective*. Collective virtuosity sheds light on the aesthetic and ethical aspects of social interaction in groups, extending notions of timelessness beyond the individual level. In this paper we will explore factors that encourage and discourage the emergence of collective virtuosity in groups. We conclude with managerial implications and directions for further research.

KEY WORDS: group, team, aesthetic experience, ethics, virtuosity, flow, timelessness

Collective virtuosity is the aesthetic experience in a group that is transformed by its very own performance. Such is the case in small, high-achieving groups, like “hot groups,” that in Leavitt’s and Lipman-Bluman’s (1995:110) words, “labor intensely at their task – living, eating and sleeping their work.” Descriptions of these groups highlight not only the preoccupation with a task, but also the intellectual and emotional intensity, integrity and exchange that exist in such groups. Impassioned by a task that is “ennobling” (Leavitt, 1996), such as finding the cure for Alzheimer’s disease, people cast their inhibitions to the side, engaging both in the task and with one another. Ideas flow amongst group members, and debates often rage as well. While previous studies of such groups have focused on the ennobling or meaningful task as the primary motivator of such groups, we add to this understanding the transformative power of group performance.

The experiences of “flow” at work (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) and timelessness (Mainemelis, 2001) are qualitatively similar to stories told by members of hot groups. That is, there is a loss of sense of time and engrossment in work, often resulting in increased creativity. The timelessness framework ties together personal factors like intrinsic motivation, task factors like clear goals and optimal challenges and work environment factors like autonomy and meaningful work to account for the manifest experience of timelessness. When work is done in a social setting, that is, in a group, the experience of flow and timelessness becomes furthermore contingent on an aesthetic experience of others’ performance.

The aesthetic experience at work has been explored (Sandelands & Buckner, 1989) in relationship to the psychology of feelings of work. Just as beauty and art can enthrall the human spirit, so can work “evoke and sustain a play of mind at the fringe of awareness,” (Sandelands & Buckner, 1989: 122). Such experiences, like flow and timelessness occur at an individual level. The purpose of this paper is to describe these experiences on the group level, demonstrating how this may lead to what we call collective virtuosity.

Virtuosity is the display of extreme grace and skill in performance, as in the case of highly talented musical soloists like contemporary violinist Itzhak Perlman. The concept of virtuosity intersects a several centuries-long history of aesthetics and ethics. To better understand the dynamics of a group performing with collective virtuosity, we trace some of

that history, and relate it to our understanding of organizational aesthetics. This growing body of literature (Dobson, 1999; Linstead & Hopfl, 2000; Strati, 1999; see special issues on aesthetics and organizations in *Human Relations* Vol 55 No.7, 2002 and *Consumption, Markets and Culture*, 5 (1), 2002) forces us to look beyond the technical and functional aspects of organized life and to focus on the sensual, perceptive, communicative and emotional. For instance, there have been studies of the aesthetic characteristics of job descriptions (Fine, 1996), work ethics (Brady, 1986), products, work environment and culture (Strati, 1992). Aesthetics has been developed as an epistemological metaphor (Strati, 1999) for a richer understanding organizational life and even been argued as an inherent part of organizational theory (Guillen, 1997). Like these approaches, we draw on aesthetic theory that acknowledges the beautiful in the every day and not just in formal works of art. We move beyond these perspectives however by focusing on the aesthetics of social interaction.

The idea of aesthetic interactions draws on the work of Taylor (2002) who conceptualizes organizational members' aesthetic experience as being based on the involvement of both the performer and audience. "Verbal performance is the closest in form of any of the arts to the art of management. Most of a manager's work is verbal and interactive which makes it more like storytelling than like dance, theatre, painting writing or other arts... the aesthetic transaction includes both performer and audience, and because for organizational action the roles of performer and audience may switch back and forth rapidly as managers interact with each other and their staffs..." (Taylor, 2002: 824). This constant interplay makes the distinctions between performer and audience disappear in a group setting where displays of virtuosity become collective.

While collective virtuosity is conceivable only under specific circumstances, the domains in which collective virtuosity can be found are limitless. Any group, from cross-functional project groups, to research labs, choirs, school boards of education, strategy teams, jazz bands or high school hockey teams may exhibit the startling characteristics of a group performing with collective virtuosity. In this paper we will describe nature of such groups, as well as explore the question, under what circumstances might we expect collective virtuosity to emerge? We can answer that question only in the negative, that is explain what conditions would be barriers to the group-level aesthetic experience. A prescriptive, causal

model of collective virtuosity is as elusive as explaining what constitutes great art and beauty. Just the same, this new perspective inevitably leads to important questions and reflections about how to study and create the context for this unique group experience.

We begin by reviewing the hot group literature's focus on the task, and relate it group dynamics literature on cohesiveness. Moving beyond the task, we take a turn to the aesthetic experience as one that captures the deep emotional and intellectual aspects of the hot group experience. We then trace the history of aesthetics and ethics as it relates to virtuosity and suggest how it ultimately culminates in a contemporary notion of collective virtuosity. We discuss factors that are barriers to creation of collective virtuosity and explore how this concept adds to the diverse literatures on groups and aesthetics. We conclude by proposing managerial implications and future directions for research.

WHAT ARE HOT GROUPS?

Hot groups are fast moving, relatively small groups of people that are impassioned by what they do. Their relentless dedication to their task consumes their every thought and action. The groups share extremely tight bonds among members, however not everyone necessarily has strong personal affinity for one another. Personal feelings take second priority to the task to be done. As a result, arguments and enthusiasm are a regular part of the hot group experience creating an energetic and exhausting atmosphere. Personal burnout is the greatest danger in these groups, and when they finally do end, there is a period of withdrawal and deep nostalgia.

The work that people engage in is not considered work. They are transported from the humdrum of the everyday to a transcendental experience that is described in very emotional terms. Time seems to stand still during this state of ecstasy. People feel stretched beyond their own limits. They are typically made of young, brash people, much like the start-ups of Silicon valley who do not have regard for the routines of conventional bureaucratic organizations. The spirit that pervades in hot groups can be found not only in Silicon Valley startups, but also in groups of many backgrounds and endeavors that demonstrate such fervor for their task.

Paraphrased from Lipman-Blumen & Leavitt, 1999; Leavitt, 1996

TASKS

In the existing literature on hot groups, there is consistent focus on the importance of the group task in forming the hot group state of mind. We find this corroborates numerous studies on task-centered cohesiveness (Bernthal & Insko, 1993; Golembiewski, 1961; Hackman, 1976; Zaccaro & Lowe, 1988; Zaccaro, 1991). Group processes and norms differ from those of groups that have interpersonal, or socio-emotional cohesiveness in that they are primarily focused on task facilitation and completion. Despite the interpersonal challenges that may arise in such groups in which members are not necessarily friends, the

commitment to the task takes priority such conflicts. In the case of hot groups, Leavitt (1996:298) states “when the child has fallen into a deep well, then commitment to our common task, not to one another, is the primary glue that binds us.” Such an instrumental focus often leads task cohesive groups to superior levels of performance and renders them less prone to groupthink (Bernthal & Insko, 1993; Zaccaro, 1991; Zaccaro & Lowe, 1988).

Lipman-Blumen and Leavitt (1999) qualify the task as one which is “ennobling” and uplifting for the spirit. They claim it is the task imbued with meaning and intrinsic challenge that creates a strong group with a passion to achieve and succeed. A task that is meaningful implies that there is a fit between the task requirements and the values, beliefs and behaviors of the people performing it (Spreitzer, 1995). An example of the ennobling task would be researching a cure for cancer, given it is meaningful in the eyes of the researcher.

The intrinsic challenge of a task is related to the capacities and skills of the members. If there is a match between these two such that the task is neither too easy to cause boredom nor too difficult to discourage participation, then the task is “optimally challenging” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Such optimally challenging tasks have been shown not only to captivate attention and interest to the exclusion of everything else, but also to be a source of fulfillment for the people engaged in it.

The task that is both meaningful and optimally challenging promotes task-centered cohesiveness and also contributes to the state of mind that characterizes hot groups. Just the same, we propose that at the heart of the transformational experience of hot groups is much more than passion for a task. Certainly, not all Alzheimer’s researchers belong to a hot group. Why is it that there are many groups engaged in meaningful and ennobling tasks, yet they are not hot groups? We propose that while the task is important, there are other factors contributing to the manifest experience of hot groups, namely aesthetic considerations.

We begin our exploration by considering the striking similarities between descriptions of the aesthetic experience and the experiences of hot groups, flow and timelessness. While these manifest experiences occur in vastly different contexts, they each entail the complete captivation of one’s mind and heart. These intensely engrossing experiences have a particularly long and rich heritage in the realm of art.

THE AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE AND FLOW

There are human accounts that date centuries telling of the awe, delight and exhilaration some have experienced in their encounter with art. Poetry has forever painted pictures of the delight of nature, and songs and dance that has enthralled the human spirit. There is no singular human experience in the face of beauty, however scholars of aesthetics starting with Baumgarten in the 19th century and continuing through contemporary accounts by philosophers like John Dewey and Monroe Beardsley have identified salient characteristics and functions of the aesthetic experience. We present some of the common features of the nature of this unique experience.

Monroe Beardsley (1982) proposes five recurring themes (from Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson, 1990:7):

(1) object focus: the person willingly invests attention in a visual stimulus; (2) felt freedom: he or she feels a sense of harmony that preempts everyday concerns and is experienced as freedom; (3) detached affect: the experience is not taken literally, so that the aesthetic presentation of a disaster might move the viewer to reflection but not to panic; (4) active discovery: the person becomes cognitively involved in the challenges presented by the stimulus and derives a sense of exhilaration from the involvement; (5) wholeness: a sense of integration follows from the experience, giving the person a feeling of self-acceptance and self-expansion.

Schopenhauer (1969:178-9), in describing this process, states “we lose ourselves entirely in this object... we forget our individuality, our will, and continue to exist only as pure subject.” During the aesthetic experience our attention is firmly fixed upon heterogeneous but interrelated components. The yearning to resolve the inherent tensions and build connections among parts creates strong intensity, an intensity that blocks out peripheral distractions (noises, phone calls, etc). Not only is the art object coherent and with unity, but so is the experience. One thing leads to another, and there is continuity of development. Even if the experience is temporarily broken off, the experience is capable to picking up with remarkable speed almost as if there had been no interruption (Beardsley, 1969).

When the self is regained after having been lost and absorbed in the object, one's senses and imagination have explored new possibilities of the world and these possibilities have become part of the self (Collinson, 1992). This regaining of self is associated with accounts of felt freedom from the routine (Beardsley, 1982), personal delight, new knowledge,

clarity and a sense of acquaintance with reality or truth. Such a process is both challenging and rewarding for the person experiencing it.

In parallel to philosophical inquiry into the aesthetic experience, psychologist Csikszentmihalyi (1990) has described the “flow” experience. People experiencing flow become completely absorbed in their work to the point that nothing else seems to matter. Csikszentmihalyi (1990:74) claims that for people who have had the flow experience, “it provided a sense of discovery, a creative feeling of transporting the person into a new reality. It pushed the person to higher levels of performance, and led to previously undreamed-of states of consciousness. In short, it transformed the self by making it more complex.”

Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson (1990:8-9) suggest that philosophers describing the aesthetic experience and the psychologists describing flow are “talking about essentially the same state of mind.... When this heightened state of consciousness occurs in response to music, painting, and so on, we call it an aesthetic experience. In other contexts, such as sports hobbies, challenging work, and social interactions, the heightened state of consciousness is called a flow experience.” If we consider group performance a form of art, then one can imagine an aesthetic experience also occurring in a community of people interacting. We propose that such is the case for hot groups.

Consider these two descriptions of personal experiences:

We are not in complete harmony at the start. But if the run begins going well, all of us, all of us feel for others. How can I say this?... When our minds become one, I understand something... All of a sudden I realize, “Oh, we’re one.”... When we realize that, we become one flesh.... It’s really super.

A member of a Japanese *bosozoku* motorcycle gang, an example of a hot group (Lipman-Blumen & Leavitt, 1999: 50)

When I see works that come close to my heart, that I think are really fine, I have the strangest reaction, which is not always exhilaration, it is sort of like being hit in the stomach. Feeling a little nauseous. It’s just this completely overwhelming feeling, which then I have to grope my way out of, calm myself down, and try and approach it scientifically, not with all of my antennae vulnerable, open... What comes to you after looking at it calmly, after you’ve really digested every nuance and every little thread, is the total impact. When you encounter a very great work of art, you just know it and it thrills you in all of your senses, not just visually, but sensually and intellectually.

A museum professional describing the aesthetic experience (Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson (1990:35-36)

These explicit connections between flow, aesthetic experience and hot groups beg for an extended look at the aesthetics of group interaction.

VIRTUOSITY AND AESTHETIC INTERACTION

When we are in a museum and we encounter what we consider to be beautiful art, we have the potential to have the aesthetic experience. When we are at work and we encounter what we consider to be beautiful work, we have the potential to have the flow experience. When we are in a group and we encounter our own beautiful performance, we have the potential to have a shared aesthetic experience.

In the case of traditional performance arts, like music and dance, the aesthetic object exists in time and space through sounds and movements. In such contexts, one typically talks of aesthetic attributes such as grace and form. Such grace and form can also be attributed to rhetorical modes of speaking, presentation of one's self to others, and ways of interacting in general. To better understand the role of grace and form in performance, we turn to a concept that historically embodies it – virtuosity.

While the term virtuosity first appeared in the 16th century and evolved to refer to extreme technical skill and fluency in performance, it has a history dating back to ancient Greece. Virtuosity carries an inherent tension between *virtue* (moral excellence) and *virtù* (practical excellence). While modern English language has partially addressed that tension by distinguishing between the virtuous person and the virtuoso, it is a tension that persists in our contemporary usage of the term. In fact, attributing virtuosity to one's performance even nowadays may either be to venerate the person's extreme skill or to disparage the person's exhibitionism and attempt at seduction of the audience (Palmer, 1998). This duality poses the question of whether the highly skilled person does the "right" or moral thing. We will explore the evolution of the answer to this question from ancient Greece through modernism, humanism and ultimately contemporary postmodernism.

In ancient Greece, Aristotle proposed virtues (from the Greek *arête*) as the proper measure of action. Virtues like courage and prudence represented intermediateness between extremes. In order to strike a virtuous balance in one's actions, it was necessary to practice and build up the habit of doing so. Aristotle by way of analogy refers to the craftsman and musician who must practice his trade to refine and improve his skill. Such practice

culminated in the Greek notion of excellence, which was ultimately the realization of one's true nature. In Greek teleology, each person, whether he was a slave or a sculptor, was born with a function and an end to realize. The virtuous person, according to Aristotle, practices his natural function excellently.

Modernism ushered in a different view of man, one that was not based on a natural teleology but rather the absence of it. Man was suddenly free to choose his destiny, and virtuous action could no longer be thought of in terms of fulfilling end purposes but rather in limiting one's seemingly endless freedoms. Thus modern ethics focuses on self-limitations of one's freedom and autonomy. In sum, moral action can be defined as disinterested action, that is action that goes against one's own interests and egoism. The Church furthered this ideology by defining cardinal virtues in terms of moral subservience. Possessing natural talents, such as being good looking or having extreme physical or intellectual skill, no longer had ethical value or virtue. Ethical action was thus accessible to anyone regardless of social class or innate talents who was able to limit him or herself and follow moral imperatives. In consequence, the old aristocratic excellence was replaced by a democratic notion of excellence, known as merit. One's natural talents and beauty were prone to seduction and were delegated to the realm of aesthetics rather than ethics.

This schism between talent and morality, that is, between aesthetics and ethics became even more blatant with the rise of humanism. In 16th century Renaissance Italy, the humanists fought to liberate themselves from the Church ideologies that had defined human excellence in terms of such things as Aquinas' cardinal virtues. The humanists, more concerned with the human excellence and power not necessarily derived from God and the Church, championed the Italian idea of *virtù*. This word also meant excellence, but with an accent on man-derived excellence, as the Latin root *vir-* means "man". Thus we have Latin-derived English words such *virility* and *virulent*. *Virtù* embodied an individual's deftness, energy, efficacy, life-force, and even heroism (Palmer, 1998). Such excellence was acutely aesthetic in its seductiveness, and was thus not virtuous.

The Italian terms *virtuoso* and *virtudioso* encompassed the life-force notion of *virtù-osity*. The breakthroughs in art, architecture, music and humanist scholarship during the renaissance were performed by *virtuosos*. The focus on the performer as *virtuoso*

culminated in the 19th century during the height of Romanticism. The Romantic virtuoso was characterized as one who "created art to celebrate existence, unleash the imagination, break down conventional distinctions, and provide the rhetorical possibility... of emergent innovation and radical creativity." (Peckham, 1995). The historical figure that epitomizes the Romantic virtuoso was Nicolo Paganini, an Italian violin player who, according to accounts, transformed his audience with his extraordinary talent. Paganini's virtuosity, in fact, created an aesthetic experience for all those present.

The Romantic virtuoso extends the conventional limits of expression through displays of phenomenal skill that force people to reconsider what they deem human excellence. New ideals and expectations for expressive ability are created, and possibilities are expanded in the minds of those attending to the virtuoso's performance. This "art of skill" goes beyond technical excellence required to execute a difficult task and also incorporates the beauty and elegance of form and process. Thus it is not as important *what* the virtuoso is performing in so much as *how* he/she performs it. For example, two people may play the same Bach fugue, yet whether it is a virtuoso performance depends on how it is played. This focus on skill and expressiveness further distanced virtuosity from the moral realm. Thus bank robbers could be virtuosos just as much as violinists.

In the last century, postmodernism has posed a challenge to the separation between aesthetic and ethics, closing the gap. The ancient virtues of natural order, the modern merit and moral duties, and the humanist aesthetic of *virtù* seem converge upon a simple maxim: *be yourself*. The focus is no longer on constraining one's desires, but rather on discovering the true nature of one's self and being *authentic* in one's actions.

Authenticity in art was defined in the 1960s by the immediacy of the artist's intention and the immediacy of the effect on the viewer (Ferry, 1993). This led to spontaneity and improvisation in the performing arts, for example, jazz. In the words of Sharon Welsh (1999:22), "Jazz is a vitalism founded on aesthetics; on creativity, integrity, and energy in the face of societal limits; and on individual failures, limits and mistakes... jazz emerges from the awareness of who the other musicians are, what they are doing at the moment, and their particular configuration of strengths and weaknesses."

Jazz, as the exemplification of aesthetic awareness of the other combined with an ethic of authenticity, has been proposed as a model for a pluralistic and multicultural world (Welsh, 1999). The open musical conversations, intense exchange and respect for the other musicians inherent in jazz offer a metaphor for how people of vastly different faiths and backgrounds can interrelate and create community together. In the same vein, jazz has been proposed as a model for organizations (see Organization Science special issue October 1998, ie Weick, 1998; Hatch, 1998; Crossan, 1998). The fluidity of exchange within the group fueled by individual effort creativity and technique has made jazz a counterpart to the bureaucratic, command and control organization, like in the case of hot groups.

Through an ethic of authenticity that not only acknowledges but also deeply listens to the other and his/her differences on an aesthetic as well as intellectual and affective level, we witness new forms of virtuosity, namely *collective virtuosity*. As in the case of jazz, the solo performer and audience loses its meaning in a group where everyone is simultaneously performer and audience. Such is the case in many groups and teams where performer and audience switch back and forth constantly (Taylor, 2002).

When a group has collective virtuosity, the members are having the aesthetic experience of each other's authentic and skillful performance of the group task. By incorporating aesthetics into our studies of groups, we are drawn to sensual, perceptive, communicative and emotional aspects of group life. This has implications for how we study and create the context for the aesthetic experience in groups.

DISCUSSION

Social psychological literature on groups has long debated over sources of cohesiveness in highly performative groups, namely whether it is attributed to the task or socio-emotional bonds among group members. This debate has in some ways provoked an identity crisis in the field of OD (organizational development) whose traditional humanistic values have, for some, been compromised with a newfound focus on the instrumental task (Sashkin & Burke, 1987). While the notion of employee satisfaction has not been abandoned per say, the path toward it has radically changed. Cognitive psychology has stressed the importance of the challenging and optimal task in engaging people's minds and hearts at

work, and in some cases, we seem to have forgotten the joy and challenges of simply working with others.

Collective virtuosity adds to the group dynamics literature on cohesiveness by refining the way we conceptualize the moderators of tasks and the relationships. For one, by thinking of the work we engage in as having the potential to have characteristics of art (see Sandelands & Buckner, 1989), we may be closer to understanding why certain tasks engage some people, and not others. In terms of socio-emotional bonds, there has been criticism for their tendency to lead to groupthink (Janis, 1982). We would argue that friendships and socio-emotional bonds are not necessarily the cause of groupthink in so much as the lack of authenticity may be. In groups performing with collective virtuosity, the authenticity of the moment may lead to conflict, debate and honest discussion, thus preventing groupthink.

Moreover, extant research on intragroup conflict (Jehn & Mannix, 2001; Amason & Sapienza 1997) has shown how such conflict can lead to higher group performance, particularly when related to task and process rather than relationships. Collective virtuosity is in line with this research as it implies a similar task and process-based conflict arising through authentic interactions. Longstanding friendships are not necessarily required for such authenticity, but the socio-emotional bond of trust is (Jehn & Mannix, 2001).

While we cannot prescribe how to create collective virtuosity in the workplace, we can speculate under what conditions it will not emerge. If people are not open to truly listening to, watching, feeling and sensing what others are doing, then collective virtuosity cannot emerge. This implies a strong importance of face-to-face meetings and real-time, co-present collaboration. The ethic of authenticity calls for a group context where people feel open and trustful of one another to act spontaneously and candidly. We propose that creating such a context is the challenge to leaders of collective virtuosity.

Collective virtuosity builds on our understanding of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) and timelessness (Mainemelis, 2001) in the workplace. These concepts provide strong frameworks in terms of factors that contribute to the manifest experience of engrossment in one's work, not only terms of specifying qualities of tasks, but also contextual and personal factors. Collective virtuosity extends these notions to the group level by identifying the transformational power of fellow group members' performance.

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

CONCLUSIONS

The construct of collective virtuosity may very well play a critical role in the emergence of new and exceptional performance in work settings. Beyond the increase in performance, the shared aesthetic experience is often dear to those who have it, thus collective virtuosity may be a major source of increased job satisfaction and employee retention. Future research on collective virtuosity could focus on how the construct interacts with other group processes, emergent states and context variables like group cohesion, size and composition, task characteristics, and leadership. To investigate these relationships would require methodologies that can capture the aesthetic experience. Such methodologies would likely entail significant qualitative as well as more traditional measurement techniques. Participant observation, action research and ethnographic studies would lend themselves well to observing and experiencing the engrossing nature of the shared aesthetic experience. Since a group with collective virtuosity has strong and definite boundaries, a researcher that is external to the group would not necessarily be privy to the group's shared language, norms and nuances of the experience.

Researchers might also explore negative impacts of or barriers to collective virtuosity. The involving and engaging character of the collective experience might lead to personal exhaustion and burnout, as is often the case with hot groups. Moreover, the almost intoxicating character of collective virtuosity may make group members hostile to external interference with it, as well as discourage collaboration with external groups that do not share the same aesthetic experience. Thus integrating new members and unanticipated departures may disrupt collective virtuosity and in some cases cause emotional turmoil. While collective virtuosity thrives on intra-group conflict and dynamic tensions that are authentic, a drop in trust or respect among group members could lead to destructive conflict and in-fighting. Further research could investigate how authenticity moderates intragroup conflict.

In terms of process factors, researchers might explore the conditioning variables that might contribute to or inhibit collective virtuosity. Moreover, researchers could test for context variables such as the degree and quality of group sensory interaction that might impact the collective aesthetic experience directly. Such contextual factors change dramatically in the

case of virtual groups and teams, thus offering researchers a stark challenge to extend the meaning of collective virtuosity to a virtual setting. Research on these variables might reveal practical changes that an organization might make to encourage the shared aesthetic experience and therefore increase the potential for collective virtuosity to emerge.

A challenge to studying collective virtuosity is “aesthetic muteness” (Taylor, 2002). Organizational members are typically trained to think rather than feel, thus extracting feelings about personal issues like identity and relationships with others can be a delicate and difficult issue. Directly addressing aesthetic concerns like beauty and perception may be perceived as soft and disconnected from organizational concerns of efficiency and the bottom line. Discussions of aesthetics certainly complexify the picture of organizational life, making it less tidy and controlled. However any attempts to completely remove the aesthetic from human interaction can only lead to *anaesthesia*, or numbness. Collective virtuosity calls for research and leadership that acknowledges personal feelings associated with organized life.

The aesthetic experience does not occur every time we encounter art, not even in the face of what we may consider great art. This elusive character of the aesthetic experience has caused some (Hospers, 1982) to challenge whether it exists at all claiming that there is no way to distinguish it from moral, religious, intellectual, or even sexual experience. While there are causal aspects that will probably never be explained, the study of art and artists has shed light on this mysterious facet of human life. We encourage continued conversations between artists, philosophers, psychologists and organizational members to further our burgeoning understanding.

Finally, the role of the leader deserves further study in the context of collective virtuosity. The morality of the transformational or charismatic leader (Bass, 1985; House, 1977; Burns, 1978) has been drawn into question for his/her use of impression management, manipulation, and emotional engagement of followers toward ends contrary to their best interests (Stevens, D’Intino & Victor, 1995). Proponents of transformational leadership have responded by proposing a distinction between the amoral pseudo-transformational leader and the authentic transformational leader. By definition, authentic transformational leaders “increase awareness of what is right, good, important and beautiful, when they help to elevate followers’ needs for achievement and self-actualization, when they foster in followers higher moral

maturity and they move followers to go beyond their self-interests for the good of their group, organization or society" (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999:186). Could such authentic leadership be an integral part of collective virtuosity? We suggest that the awareness of what is right, good, important and beautiful is not only in the eyes of the leader. Take this story recounted by the musical director of a Swiss community choir:

We were all extremely tired, and all my efforts to release the mounting tension with a joke were useless. The sopranos simply could not laugh after I made them sing the vocally demanding passage for the 4th time during the last 10 minutes of our intense 2-hour rehearsal. I was not satisfied with the result, nor were they. The other 28 singers sat and listened, at first patiently. But they too, were becoming impatient and discouraged. 'Try supporting the sound more... don't use so much vibrato... raise your soft palette... imagine a darker sound...' so I encouraged and encouraged, time after time.

And I believe it was the 6th time, or perhaps I'm wrong and it was the 10th. Actually it doesn't matter. The 9 sopranos suddenly relinquished their struggle with the passage in question, and sang together as one rich, sublimely beautiful voice. The change was startling to all those who were present, myself included. I immediately started the piece from the beginning with the rest of the choir, and I heard them sing as I never heard them sing before. The 37 voices coalesced into one beautifully transparent sound that opened my heart with joy. The choir had a sense of wholeness that transcended the harmonies they were producing. We all stood motionless, yet the music was dancing in sparkling vitality.

After rehearsal, I spoke with some of the sopranos. Alice was ecstatic and said, "I had no idea that we were capable of such a beautiful sound! Tonight we really surpassed our limits." Anne-Marie echoed this excitement and said, "I really believe tonight showed us not to set such low expectations, or any expectations for that matter. As a group we have transcended them all. I am thoroughly looking forward to next week's rehearsal." Daisy vividly described the actual moment when the choral sound was transformed, "I had just had enough! I kept trying to sing more beautifully, imagining every time what we should sound like. Yet it wouldn't happen, and it was driving me crazy. Finally, I just sang! And there it was. And it was beautiful."

The transformational moment in that particular group was not due so much to the virtuousness or virtuosity of the leader, but rather the virtuosity of those who were singing combined the leader's and singers' authentic exchanges and critiques. Shared aesthetic experiences may suddenly arise in even the most mundane and routine of circumstances. When a group of people can seize that moment and be open to their own transformational performance, they may very well have an experience that is deeply meaningful and memorable.

FIGURE 1:

	Flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990)	Timelessness (Mainemelis, 2001)	Aesthetic experience (Sandelands & Buckner, 1989; Beardsley, 1982)	Collective Virtuosity
Level of analysis	Individual	Individual	Individual	Group
Qualities of manifest experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Merging of action and awareness • Intense concentration • Sense of heightened control • Forgetting of one's self • Forgetting of time 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feeling of immersion • Recognition of time distortion • Sense of mastery • Sense of transcendence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Felt freedom • Detached effect • Active discovery • Wholeness 	Flow + Timelessness + Aesthetic experience
Source of experience	Task/activity	Work	Art	Group performance of art-like task
Qualities of above source	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear goals • Optimally challenging • Immediate feedback • Autotelic 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear Goals • Optimally challenging • Immediate feedback • Rites of passage 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Boundary tensions • Dynamic tensions • Growth and development • Unresolved possibilities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Virtuosity (authentic and skilled)

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