

Objectal Resistance: The Political role of personal objects in workers' resistance to spatial change.

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Abstract

Flexwork, i.e. the combination of shared offices and telework, is one of the major changes affecting the workplace these days. But how do employees react to these transformations of their work environment? In this paper, we investigate employees' resistance to the introduction of flexwork in a large Belgian organization. We show employees resisting this workspace transformation through the use of personal objects as means to physically reconnect to the place, using objects to convey their claims and objectively occupy places. Though space has become a key analytic concept in the study of organizations, research still largely neglects the concrete role played by personal objects in the capacity of workers to resist change in the occupation of workspaces. We highlight the mutual constitution of objects and space in practices of resistance to workspace change. We show specifically how the *politicality* of these materials—referred to here as *objectal resistance*—comes from the meaning that people assign to objects when they *place* them in order to reestablish workers' bodily presence at work—i.e., from acts of objects embodiment and emplacement. We contribute to studies of resistance in the workplace by showing that objectal resistance is a complex combination of overt and covert

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activities, which leads to see the classic opposition between recognition and post-recognition politics in a new light.

Key words

Resistance, space, body, objects, spatial politics, office design, flexwork

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Introduction

Recent managerial policies of opening workspaces have largely revamped and recoded not only the concrete everyday use of space, but also the very definition of workers' spatial freedom in terms of mobility, boundarylessness and nomadism (Kingma, 2019; Sewell and Taskin, 2015; Sivunen and Putnam, 2020). These policies were intended to encourage working communities into passively accepting these alternative spatial forms of work, in return for the freedom to be located anywhere, including at home. Our contention is, rather, that this spatial disruption is experienced by workers as a way to eradicate spaces imbued with meanings, which not only physically transforms the working "landscape" but also alters the life at work of numerous people used to occupying the workplace in their own way. In this paper, we analyze the resisting strategies used by workers to reconnect with their workplace. Indeed, the study we conducted in a large service company introducing flexwork, i.e. when work is done partly in a shared office and partly via telework, revealed situations of resistance that appeared unique in their way to associate personal objects in order to reconnect to a specific place of work. Based on 50 semi-structured interviews and 443 photographs of worker's premises that they elicited,

we therefore focus on the role of personal objects in workers' efforts to effectively re-occupy the workplace. We thus analyze the *political* influence of objects in reshaping the uses and occupation of a workspace that is transformed by top down managerial strategies of flexwork. Organizational research has brought space back in for some time (Kornberger and Clegg, 2004). More particularly, the politics of space at work, specifically the link between resistance and space have also been the center of attention in recent scholarship (Courpasson et al., 2017; Daskalakis and Kokkinidis, 2017; Shortt, 2017). However, the role of personal objects in the articulation of space and resisting acts has been largely neglected. This is a problem because objects do influence directly the relationship with place: space itself is produced and known through its material effects (Lefebvre, 1991; Pierce and Martin, 2015). The challenge for research on resistance to spatial change is thus to recognize that workers engage in meaningful activities that have a political impact and mutually affect material objects (Parmiggiani and Mikelsen, 2013). As such, objects contribute to people's perception of their work environment (Humphries and Smith, 2018). We consider in this paper a contextual understanding of spatial resistance based upon the intimacy of the bonds between people and the objects they use and display in the workplace to make their very location concrete and visible. While previous research on people-object entanglement has largely focused on technological objects (Barley, 1996; Turkle, 1995), this paper analyzes the role of *personal* objects in influencing the shape and use of the workplace. The difference between both types of objects is significant we maintain, because personal objects such as pictures, manifest the capacity of workers to privatize certain small areas (such as desks) in the workspace ; they show how privacy goes into the workplace, while technological objects are *de facto* part and parcel of the work environment. Personal objects bring familiar and intimate "things" that have, *a priori*, nothing to do with the purpose of the workplace. Hence, we are interested in this paper in the exploration of how the use of personal objects is capable to subvert and deflect top down

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managerial projects of spatial change. The question we pose, therefore, is: How do personal objects and materials contribute to the subversion of managerial spatial codes in a changing workplace?

Our contributions are twofold. First, we propose to theorize spatial resistance as the way through which people construct specific assemblages with personal objects such as crumbs or family pictures, in order to overtly challenge the managerial view of how the workspace should be inhabited. To explain this resisting process, we craft the notion of *objectal* resistance as a twofold process based on the *embodiment* of objects (using them as extensions of individual bodies) and their *emplacement* (putting them somewhere and letting them occupy the place). We show that the potential politics of these materials—what we refer to here as *politicality*—of personal objects results from the combination of emplacement and embodiment, as the very presence of personal objects in the workplace contributes to re-shaping individual spatial “territories” at work. Second, we contribute to research on resistance at work by illuminating the complex combinations of overt and covert actions that shape the effectiveness of objectal resistance: we thus go beyond usual binaries populating research on resistance, such as the covert/overt dualism, to show that the political significance of resistance through personal objects comes precisely from the covert/overt simultaneity of spatial interventions.

The article is structured as follows. First, we introduce the socio-political and material foundations of workplace resistance and propose a concept in which resistance results from a mutual effort between workers and objects. A second section addresses the empirical background and the collection and analysis of data (i.e., 50 semi-structured interviews and 443 photographs taken at StampsCo). We then present our findings, which show embodiment and emplacement of objects as the two faces of an ‘objectal’ resistance that reveals the political significance of personal objects and matters such as crumbs or plants. Finally, we highlight the contributions of this study to the analysis of the space/resistance nexus.

Spatial resistance at work

Previous studies have already shown that resistance often happens in relation to specific places: a private house, or a bar (Courpasson et al., 2017), a public space that can be occupied (Juris 2008), transitory “dwelling places” such as toilets or corridors (Shortt, 2015). It also shows recently that resistance happens across socio-spatial boundaries: spatial resistance is here seen as “*produced by a spectrum of continuous performances (...) through the continuous interplay of fixities and mobilities*” (Daskalaki and Kokkinidis, 2017: 1305). Capturing the space/resistance nexus either through fix place-based politics (Courpasson et al., 2017; Polletta, 1999) or as socio-spatial configurations (Daskalaki and Kokkinidis, 2017), research has largely shed light on the “*spatial constitution of political activity*” (Featherstone, 2011: 142). Adopting a spatial perspective on resistance indeed means to define a given place as “*brought into being through specific performances*” (Gregson and Rose, 2000, in Lewis, 2008: 131). Organizational research has also brought space “back in” (Kornberger and Clegg, 2004), showing that space is political in itself (Massey 2005). However, the focus on the micropolitics of space has been scant (Courpasson et al., 2017; Munro and Jordan, 2013): more specifically, what we mean is that we do not know much about what workers do concretely on a day to day basis, to alter top down spatial change. Research has acknowledged that spatial change is inflected by “*unintended consequences*” (De Vaujany and Vaast, 2013: 728), including processes through which “*affective and material entanglements operate*” (Clausen and Elmholt, 2018: 45). However, the study of everyday “spatial tactics” (Clausen and Elmholt, 2018) has largely neglected the concrete influence of objects in the resisting activities of workers confronted to spatial change.

In this paper, we analyse the role of personal objects in influencing the shape and use of the workplace following a top down spatial change. This perspective draws first and foremost from

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the Lefebvrian idea that social relations exist only inasmuch as they produce material traces in space:

« The social relations of production have a social existence to the extent that they have a spatial existence: they project themselves into a space, becoming inscribed there and in the process producing that space itself. Failing this, these relations would remain in the realm of « pure » abstraction-that is to say, in the realm of representations and hence of ideology, the realm of verbalism, verbiage and empty words » (Lefebvre, 1991: 129).

For Lefebvre, space itself is therefore produced and known through its material effects (Pierce and Martin, 2015: 1284). This starting point suggests that the lived dimension of space is partly experienced through the density of the bonds that connect people with material 'stuff' in the workplace; for instance, personal objects that people bring to make sense of their very location. As a consequence, we propose that resistance to spatial change through the use of personal objects reinforces the view of resisting activities as fundamentally attached to concrete places. This object/space nexus as a major trigger and resource for spatial resistance has been the object of scant attention so far. It is all the more a shame as many spatial reforms indeed rest upon the material cleansing of the workspace (Bean and Hamilton, 2006). Therefore, if workers willingly use personal objects to claim a right to "own" a place at work, spatial resistance must be seen as a process whereby the relationship between individuals and their personal objects takes on a *political* dimension. In other words, it is the occasion where antagonistic experiences of spatial inhabiting are confronted (Latour and Yaneva, 2008).

Spatial resistance and objects

Löw (2001) suggests that space is a relational collective of people and objects. Everyday practices, perceptions and representations link people with objects: space is where things happen; therefore, *« our spatial categories always express a synthesis between activities, objects and boundaries »* (De Haan, 2015: 14). This means that the material appropriation of

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space involves the spacing and placing of material objects and boundaries. Grasping spatial resistance through the role of objects therefore demands an approach to social materiality « *whereby social processes and structures and material processes and structures are seen as mutually interacting* » (Dale, 2005: 655). In this paper, the term “materiality” is understood as « *the engagement between bodies, tools, materials and substances that occur through physical things* » (Humphries and Smith, 2018: 483), thereby attending to the tangible things that can be precisely located in space.

In his analysis of the change in role relations in a radiology department produced by the introduction of a CT scanner, Barley (1996) showed that objects do change the power and relationship dynamics at work by imposing themselves upon work practices and re-shaping the meaning of tasks (see also Humphries and Smith, 2018; Suchman, 2005). In a similar vein, this paper argues that specific objects can be given a *political* meaning by people, through the mediation of space. The enmeshment between objects and people at work then allows reshaping both the concrete physical occupation of offices and the meanings associated with « owning » the place. It is this dynamic interplay between objects and people that sustains resisting efforts by materializing a bond between places and people.

The theoretical challenge posed by this *objectal* perspective on spatial resistance is thus to incorporate the political influence of objects into the Lefebvrian conception of the lived experience of space. For Lefebvre, lived experience is a mechanism that produces space concretely, thereby insisting upon its materiality. Significantly for our understanding of resistance, Lefebvre's articulation of lived space as the space of [everyday] experience draws on a conceptualization of the lived as the physical. The particular place where people live has often been defined as « *sites where people live, work and move, and where they form attachments, practice their relation with each other and relate to the rest of the world* » (Leitner et al., 2008: 161). According to this view, place is a local site in which particular actions occur

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(Nicholls, 2009; Routledge, 2003). Such perspective views place dynamics [including power dynamics] as based on complex relational processes involving people and objects. Recent scholarship on geography (Massey, 2005) sees places as bundles « *of the space-time trajectories of various kinds of objects: human beings, physical objects* » (Pierce and Martin, 2015: 1287). In this view, the Lefebvrian lived space is largely shaped by the complex relationships between people and objects ; this relational understanding analyses places as assemblages of different kinds of components that are bound together through processes of place-framing (Martin, 2003), thus making place a relational object itself (Pierce and Martin, 2015).

Politicizing the place with objects

Previous studies highlight daily struggles and tensions occurring between how workers experience their workspaces and the power dynamics existing within the organization (Shortt, 2015; Bell and Forbes, 1994; Tyler and Cohen, 2010). However, these studies do not discuss the political aspect of these experiences, i.e., their chance of modifying – even lightly - the structures and usages of the workplace. Shortt (2015) explores the creative power of everyday conversations in liminal spaces for the purpose of producing a sense of seclusion and privacy, away from managerial spaces seen as « *sites of expectation and corporate culture* » (p. 652). But these spaces remain at the margin, unobtrusively opposed to the realm of dominant spaces, though they are starting to be used by official monitors of space (Dale and Burrell, 2008; Oke, 2002). In a recent paper, Shortt and Izak study scarred objects (such as battered corners on desks) as generative of meaningful memory anchors or “time marks” helping people « *to gain a sense of place through (...) a subjective engagement with these time marks* » (Walsh, 1992: 152, quoted in Shortt and Izak, 2021). However, the political power of this sort of material trace (Pierce and Martin, 2015) is not addressed as such. Shortt and Izak's study rather focuses

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on objects as autobiographical narratives that help people to « *regain subjective material histories in the contemporary workplace* » (Shortt and Izak, 2021: 1690).

To analyse spatial resistance, we rather explore how dominant spaces are overtly transformed in private dwelling places through the individual intervention of workers using objects to convey their claims and objectively occupy places. Objects become a major vehicle for politicizing the complex relationships between people and their place of work: they are objects of resistance. Objects of resistance are analysed in this paper as spatial imperfections that allow workers to bring material individualizing features to their place of work. They help workers to resist sanitized and modernized workspaces where transparency and cleanliness are the norm (Bean and Hamilton, 2006; Shortt and Izak, 2021).

Our contention is thus that personal objects can gain a political significance in struggles over the appropriate use of space because they expose personalized imperfections and intimate materials that contrast overtly with the dominant narrative of space. Attachments to personal objects reveal who we are and embed our past within material memories (Kwint et al., 1999; Shortt and Izak, 2021). In a way, this suggests that our very identities can be physically displayed in the objects we own and use. Objects can thus be politically meaningful because of what they become in a given context, rather than merely in relation with their official function (Thames, 1991). As such, the *politicality* of these materials comes from the meaning people give to them, that is to say *where* they choose to locate them, particularly in places where they should not be placed. Elsbach (2003) shows how displaying specific material possessions is connected to a sense of belonging. Objects can also serve to « *extend the self* » according to Tian and Belk (2005: 300), thereby constituting crucial means of sensemaking (Brown et al., 2008). Shortt and Izak (2021) explore the everyday items of work that are normally not owned in the era of flexwork and clean desk policies. Precisely, in this paper, whilst retaining a focus on the object itself, we emphasize the political meaning that workers

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place on their objects' location. Indeed, placing a given object in a specific imperfect or unauthorized location is associated, we argue, with the message of resistance that people intend to communicate to management.

The argument

These elements situate our argument within debates over the role of objects in the politics of organizational life, particularly in the study of resistance to spatial change. Objects have long been central to political analyses: for instance, research has shown how views of contemporary American power were modified by photographic images of President Bush (Theus and Coleman, 2009), or how drones have reshaped the contours and representations of everyday life security (Meehan et al., 2013; Shaw and Akhten, 2002). Popular icons and texts reveal political struggles over identity and territory (Raeuto, 2011). Yet, while materiality has been discussed in political terms recently (Beyes et al., 2019; Braun and Whatemore, 2010), studies on the political role of objects in organizations are still lacking.

In this paper, we analyse personal objects and matters as starting points of power relationships. Put differently, we propose an object-related approach to spatial politics by stressing the power that objects can take in a struggle over the use of space, depending on their very location as well as their unexpected presence in the workspace. This perspective is important, we argue, because resistance to spatial change cannot be simply captured by words and feelings. All objects, even mundane, can be defined by « ...*their capacity to act and be acted upon* » (Bryant, 2011: 274). In the words of Meehan and colleagues (2013: 3): « *An object is precisely what it does* ». Objects are engines of affective relationships, and as such can be disobedient (Flood and Grindas, 2014). We argue that objects, however ordinary, do matter politically; they are able to unleash forces « *capable of creating, policing and destroying the very contours of existence* » (Shaw, 2012: 613).

Empirical background

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Among the new practices used to reorganise and modernise workspaces, shared offices constitute one of the most popular trends. The term relates to a sanitised, standardised and shared workspace, which cannot be appropriated by any single user and encourages nomadic and flexible work practices (Connellan, 2013; Elsbach, 2003; Gonsalves, 2020; Hirst, 2011; King and Vickery, 2013; Taskin et al., 2019). These new workspaces, coupled with the practice of telework, represent an ideal of flexibility, freedom and autonomy, while at the same time supposedly reducing the existing hierarchical gap between management and workers. As members of the organisation no longer have an attributed workspace, there is no space to serve as an indicator of status or position. The particular feature of these workspaces is that they dispossess workers of their personal space and effectively prohibit the appropriation and personalisation of the workplace (Bradley and Hood, 2003; Warren, 2006). In other words, this practice prohibits any enduring occupation of a workspace within the organisation (Elsbach, 2003; van Meel, 2011) to such an extent that any object and material trace of physical occupation are removed to make the workspace sterile and identity-less (Connellan, 2013).

These workspace transformations, underpinned by cost-cutting objectives and calls for greater flexibility and/or collaboration among employees, appear to be driven by other factors as well. Some authors, writing from a critical management perspective, note that these spatial transformations cannot simply be reduced to a physical modification of workspaces but also include ideological and cultural changes to discipline workers (Dale and Burrell, 2008; Hirst and Humphreys, 2013; Vickery, 2013). For many years, considering the workplace as a social space, several authors have shown how these spatial transformations contribute to the materialisation of new discourses and power relations (Clegg and Kornberger, 2006; Dale and Burrell, 2008; Foucault, 1975), as well as the diffusion of new subjectivities (Beyes and Steyaert, 2011; Hancock and Spicer, 2011; Zhang and Spicer, 2014), or the re-regulation of working communities and social relationships (Ajzen and Taskin, 2021). Most organizational

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literature examines how space contributes to control over workers, with little attention paid to the specific ways in which space produces resistance (Courpasson et al., 2017; Courpasson, 2017).

Context and setting

StampsCo (a pseudonym) is a belgian autonomous public company active in the sector of large network industries that employed over 27,000 workers at the time of our investigation. From the early 2000's, the firm was committed to a long-term restructuring process linked to the liberalization process of one of the main StampsCo's activity—and that became effective in 2010—as well as to its IPO on the stock exchange in 2013. In order to prepare to these challenges acting as drivers of a major modernization process, the organization undertook a global transformation strategy based on (i) the adoption of a customer-orientation, (ii) a focus on performance and cost reduction and, finally, (iii) managerial transformations.

Managerial change was driven by the willingness to “modernize an old lady stuck in the last century” in order to attract new workers and increase employees' flexibility and empowerment. A new managerial result-driven culture was expected and mainly provided through hiring managers with an experience in the private sector who introduced new managerial tools and practices. In order to support the corporate strategy and to promote empowerment, an HR transformation plan was developed. It is based on three key principles: (i) the suppression of the clocking-in machine (badging); (ii) the implementation of a performance management system, which allows bonuses to be granted at the end of the year, thus promoting a more results-oriented work (which implies, in turn, the adjustment of the employment statutes); and (iii) the introduction of flexwork, including the redesign of the workspaces and the promotion of telework.

So, there is a bit of this notion of personal and managerial empowerment which, through these three elements [teleworking, evaluation of individual performance,

elimination of the time clock], *has been created, to a certain extent. So, I think it's a change, somewhere in the HR policy of the organization, to a certain extent* [Jean, member of the Management Committee]

Flexwork implementation

Therefore, flexwork was a visible piece of a larger puzzle aimed at introducing new ways of working in a context of New Public Management deployment (Kaboolian, 1998). Work flexibility therefore became key for the management, and the practice of home-based telework was considered as a way to contribute to the development of a corporate culture promoting autonomy and responsibility. The HR director was proud of the collective agreement settled with the unions' representatives, since it explicitly mentioned telework was allowed in return for higher productivity (see below).

After a pilot programme started in 2010, StampsCo proceeded to the redesign of its workspaces, in their main building in Brussels. Management's stated purpose was to increase workers' performance and reduce the real-estate costs. As such, over a two-year period ranging from 2012 to 2014, employees from retail, production and support departments (i.e., human resource management, internal auditing, finance and IT) experienced the introduction of new workspaces featuring shared offices. The employees of StampsCo, previously accustomed to the benefit of individually attributed open and personalised workspaces, were therefore subject to significant change since any type of personalisation became prohibited. The members of the executive committee and team managers, who previously enjoyed certain privileges in terms of work surface area, lighting and furnishings, were also required to adapt to the new practice. Its implementation modified a symbolic dimension of power that their offices once embodied. The general rule for workspace availability is 80 stations for a staff of 100.

In more concrete terms, new 'common rules' were implemented for working spaces (e.g., new standards for cleanliness as well as prohibitions on eating at the desk, occupying the same desk

all day, and decorations, among other things); meeting rooms (e.g., mandatory reservation, suitable room for the number of attendees, and specific IT requirements); and the newly created collaborative working spaces. These rules required all staff members to remove all documents, objects or personal effects from their workspaces at the end of each day and to occupy available workspaces based on predefined zones (see picture 1). The spatial transformation also involved the creation of semi-open spaces for concentration and enclosed meeting rooms to allow staff to isolate themselves from the main work environment in order to carry out specific tasks or teamwork, based on the principle of the *activity-based workplace*. Each floor of the 14-storey building was designed according to the same spatial configuration: one locker per staff member at the entrance to each floor, one open space, enclosed meeting rooms, semi-open concentration spaces and a communal cafeteria. Staff received laptop computers and backpacks to allow them to be more flexible and mobile, and communal printers were installed on each floor. Each worker received a backpack or a trolley, which further embodied the value the organization placed on flexibility and mobility.

[Insert Picture 1 about here]

The highest floor, housing the executive committee, was the first one renovated to reflect support from top management. Workspace transformation was accompanied by large communication efforts. For example, guided tours of certain floors were organized by project leaders; opinion surveys were conducted; a charter of commitment was distributed to staff presenting the principles of mobility, self-discipline and flexibility; and leaflets outlining the rules on using shared offices were displayed and placed on each workstation. Telework was the subject of numerous discussions among the project leaders and remained applied

inconsistently. When allowed, teleworking was limited to one day per week during normal business hours.

Unions did not oppose strongly to the transformation plan, despite the important changes it introduced. They were concerned with the risk of individualization performance management, empowerment and telework may constitute and they claimed that. In fact, their position was not comfortable for many reasons. First, regarding telework, the pilot experience did well and the results to the satisfaction survey administrated to the participants were very good. Unions' representatives found difficult to go against the position of their members. Second, only about 10% of the employees work in the head office and are involved in that organizational transformation. The unions do not consider them as the priority of their action in times of restructuring. Third, the HR director decided to negotiate a global collective agreement where telework and performance management only constituted one part of the agreement. So, the general agreement included employment perspectives in the restructuring of the distribution process and that was the priority of the unions at that time. Finally, one of our interviewees also raised the softness of union's action and suggested their representatives were also the beneficiaries of the HR transformation.

Listen...this is a somewhat touchy topic...because at the union level, I find that it is not that at all... I shouldn't say it but hey... [weaker voice] the management has offered higher career gradings to people who are union representatives so that... the delegates defend people, yes, but not as before... [Chris, in charge of tenders]

Method

In order to investigate how objects affect the capacity of workers to resist change in the occupation of workspace, we analysed data collected in the headquarters of StampsCo in Brussels during the implementation phase of flexwork, between June 2013 and September 2014. Data consisted of (a) internal and external documentary sources; and (b) 50 semi-

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structured interviews with staff, with an average duration of 72 minutes. To respect the privacy of interviewees, we assigned pseudonyms for the study (see Table 1). Interviews were conducted in French; translations are ours.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

These interviews were combined with the use of the photo-elicitation technique (see e.g. Davison et al., 2012; Warren, 2006). As stated by Shortt and Warren (2012: 18), « *closer attention to visible and tangible dimensions of the spatial-material world is needed in narrative research in order to focus directly on the agency of space and 'things'* », which is the purpose of our research. This method provides meaningful material characterized by 443 photographs that further illustrate the workers' experiences, particularly by presenting their workspace and the associated materials and objects. In the photo-elicitation technique, the respondent and the researcher discuss the photographs that the respondent made (Warren, 2002). This method provides a thorough interpretation of a situation that just discourse alone cannot provide by materializing the respondent's lived workspace. Photo-elicitation « *provides a way in which the interview can move from the concrete (a cataloguing of the objects in the photograph) to the socially abstract (what the objects in the photograph mean to the individual being interviewed)* » (Harper, 1986: 25). It is therefore appropriate to refer to this technique in our study of the object/space nexus, providing here visual elements (objects in the workplace) and the meaning people attribute to them (resistance). The semi-structured interviews were transcribed in full and processed using thematic analysis. The photographs were coded using the same grid.

After examining the empirical material and analyzing its relationship with relevant research on the object/space nexus, we organized data following two main second-order categories or

narratives (Bristow et al., 2017; Paillé and Mucchielli, 2016; Van Maanen, 1979). Indeed, a strong binary opposition emerged rapidly between the views of the proper use of space conveyed by flexwork and those defended by employees. In particular, this opposition appeared characterized by either bodily absence or presence, and by practices aiming to either “empty” the place or to occupy it through objectal resistance. All respondents expressed strong feelings about their personal way of occupying the space; therefore, they felt the necessity to manifest their presence. One way of doing this was by continuing to use the space in accordance with their own expectations through the display of personal objects, which we interpreted as a clear-cut opposition to flexwork principles. We took an inductive approach to understand workers' use of objects to convey their claims and objectively occupy places. We read through our data and paid particular attention to intentional workplace activities and interventions performed through the interactive actions of workers and specific objects. We created two major categories related to the tension around individual absence/presence (see table 2): 1) The *emptying process* defined by managerial attempts to render bodies invisible and remove any material markers of individual presence from the space; and 2) The ‘*objectal*’ *resistance process*, which describes how workers [re]-generate the material signs of their presence through object *embodiment* and *emplacement* in order to counter managerial definitions of what is a proper workplace.

[Insert Table 2 about here]

Based on this analysis, we extracted the observations, discussions and pictures related to the object/ space nexus to construct the notion of ‘objectal’ resistance as a political form of opposition to workspace change. This notion reflects the connection that a given individual has with a particular place, and how she interacts with specific objects in an effort to keep such

place for herself/himself despite opposing managerial prescriptions. We chose this binary analysis in order to unite our observations on these scattered objectal interventions and thereby build a narrative through the ideas of emptiness and occupation through objects. The objective was to identify patterns of resistance in the type of objectal interventions involved in the reconstruction of the space/objects connection. Using these two categories, we demonstrate how workers were excluded from the office through the forced disappearance of their personal effects, and how an intangible relationship with space was developing, namely by telework. We further convey how workers remade their presence in the office through the acts analysed as object embodiment and emplacement.

Findings

This section presents the results of our investigation into how workers' object-space relationships trigger individual interventions that oppose and eventually alter the normative expectations of management regarding the use of space at work. First, we present empirical evidence of a process of emptying the workplace. Second, we demonstrate workers' attempts to bring their presence back to the workspace and to resist the conventional occupation set by management through the process that we define as *objectal resistance*.

Workplace emptying

We conceptualize the emptying process as the separation of people from their belongings. At StampsCo, this is reflected primarily in the instructions issued to employees on how to use flexwork, as well as in the practices associated with the clean and transparent workspace. For example, the following list was extracted from printed regulations concerning a "clean desk environment":

Tidy office,

No customization,

Keyboard / mouse stored in the locker,

I set of stationery material allowed by 4 offices,

Clean (hygienic) workspace (do not eat at your desk)

This extract from the company's internal document illustrates the brief time allotted to workspace occupation, as per new rules. It is no longer a question of living or inhabiting a space, but of not devaluing it through occupation. Therefore, workers are literally required to "vanish" from the place, and the body that feeds has to disappear by removing all objects or artefacts of physical presence. Workspace is no longer a place for human life, but rather furniture available to passing occupants. As such, it should be left in the same state after use with no personal items left behind, as stated in the following extract from the 'Charter of commitment':

I store my personal belongings in my locker, and I manage the common wardrobes properly. I do not use the Flex room as a dedicated office [Charter of commitment, internal document].

However, the new rules function to dissociate the physically present worker and its belongings from the sanitized and anonymous worker whose only right is to make temporary use of a workstation. A kind of "clean police team" has been established to ensure compliance. Some translated quotes from interviewees follow:

But no, nothing can stay there. It is a common location for everyone. We must all look at the same screen; no personal items are allowed. Everyone shares the same blank screen door. No personal items are allowed. We checked before going out at night and moved everything on the desk into a bag. The next day, people had to start looking for them. [Dirk, VPHR]

A team was distributing stickers on the desks. They gave a green if one it was good, a red one if it was not good. [Pieter, account manager]

Emptying processes were numerous. Fleeting occupation was imposed in the space, mainly through removal and forced storage of personal and collective objects like plants, posters or pictures. Invisibility was the expected result.

The big advice is "do homeworking on Tuesdays and Thursdays" ... that's the advice.

[Patrick, risk manager, in reference to the structural lack of space capacity]

I told everyone, now we move, you throw stuff away. We cannot do it anymore, it's like that. There was an office where there were lots of things ... Everyone is entitled to one single shelf, I say when you do not need, you do not use that anymore, so you throw.

[Marc, head of department external clients]

Yes, the people were very, very upset because they took them [the plants] away. I will say, that was the last hint of any personal item (laughs) ... I would like to compare that to a pet ... do you know what I mean? It was really ... you snatch something from me that ... it's ... if we take a step back ... it was the last thing I still had, which belonged to me, and you take it away from me. In my office there is nothing left to me, and my office is no longer mine ... [Adrien, facility manager]

“Office” then becomes a place to work, as a workforce *stricto sensu*, emptied of its occupants and any personal effects signalling their occupation. This expressive and inhabited characteristic of space is now associated by our informants with home, i.e., “where we live” and where personal belongings (e.g., pictures, things) seem to be in their proper place.

It's not all good and it's a complete break from what we have known so far, at work and especially at home. ... At home, you cannot imagine not having your apartment or house without picture frames, you cannot imagine having white walls, you cannot imagine not having a nice table with some photos on it, and you cannot imagine not having things that represent your everyday life. When you arrive in an environment and you are told that the walls will stay white, you may not hang any pictures, you must

maintain a clean desk and you cannot drink coffee at your office ... I think it's a type of violence... [Damien, head of knowledge management]

Employees seemed resigned to temporarily hosting the workspace that was now being taken away from them (see pictures 2, 3 and 4). The impersonal aspect of the workspace—associated with the principle of emptiness—is key in the sterilization process they reported:

For me, it means that everything can be replaced in 4 seconds. It means that you have summarized all your work life at [the organization] in a small locker (...) depersonalizing the workplace. That is not cool at all. (...) You really feel like a number. I think to retain people, you have to re-personalize everything. [Johan, head of inventory management]

[Insert Pictures 2, 3 and 4 about here]

Emptying the workspace means ridding it of objects attesting the presence of its human occupants, making it a disembodied space where nobody needs either personal belongings or social relationships. Such 'clean' offices prevent workers from appropriating workspaces, but more deeply from feeling like embodied human beings.

Objectal resistance

Our investigation of the object-space relationship through Lefebvre's perspective on the lived space led our attention to the specific spatiality of objects, because as shown in the previous section, removing them is central to StampCo's new spatial policy. This section therefore examines everyday intervention of workers using mundane objects to *physically* occupy places through a process we call "objectal resistance," by which workers bring their stuff back and use it to oppose the principle of emptiness. This process is twofold: on the one hand, the objects used to manifest worker's presence are personal, even intimate, and characterized by a strong

personal identification with their owner. "Object embodiment" refers here to that feeling that those objects or materials have become « part of them. » This entails a sense of ownership and grounds them in a particular location through owned objects present in that location. On the other hand, the use of objects is ritualized; it involves the progressive creation of a habitual and persistent presence of the same objects in the same place, although this presence constitutes an imperfection that signals resistance. "Object emplacement" therefore refers to the concrete and visible instantiation of the direct relation between an object and the personal ownership of a place.

Object embodiment Ownership is at the heart of object embodiment. According to the flexwork charter, objects are banned from the workspace. A common way to re-appropriate space is to personalize it, revealing a relationship of ownership, exclusivity and attachment (Carù and Cova, 2003). Several authors have adopted these perspectives to show how appropriation behaviours—often observed in marking processes—represent inhabited acts of resistance - in other words, those grounded in materiality and spatiality (Clarke, 2012; Courpasson et al. 2017; Taylor and Spicer, 2007). However, ownership is then understood as the consequence of the marking strategy—whatever the marker is. Let us focus on the marker and its meanings for workers by considering the two following quotes and the three photo-elicitations below (pictures 5, 6 and 7):

There are people who have photos in their trolley, and the first thing they do every day is try to put them up on the walls. [Dirk, HRVP]

There too, there were people who had put a big paper on their chair: "It's my chair, do not touch my chair!" [John, external IT consultant]

The sense of property refers here to the interdependency between the person and the object—until the object merges with the body. For example, the photos commented upon by Dirk and observed at StampsCo are family pictures showing children, partner and often a private

moment of family life. Such an image is a piece of a worker's life, not just a frame. This illustrates that, in the case of object embodiment, the *politicality* of objects comes from the intimate meaning that they have have for people placing them where they should not be placed.

[Insert Pictures 5, 6 and 7 about here]

Didier (picture 5, above) repeated his statement when commenting on the picture he took of his locker: "*It is important to have little things that remind us of the family.*" Object embodiment refers to this proximity between objects and workers, due to the personal character of the objects used. As stated by Shortt and Izak (2021), attachment to artefactual objects reveal who we are. To some extent the jacket, like the family picture, merges with his/her owner so that the worker is physically present behind it. The same can be observed from the quotes below:

Me, for example, I have a bag on my shoulder that I always put on my desk. That's my thing I use to appropriate the space. (...) And in my opinion, everyone is doing it. Some may put a pillow in the space, or place a little jacket or sweater next to their PC. [Johan, head of inventory management]

We recognize the objects. It does not take much sometimes ... A little cup, for example, and we already see [who it belongs to] ... Even the jackets. We are so used to it, we see each other every day, so I think we know almost the entire wardrobes of our coworkers. [Annie, senior manager external clients]

The objects used to mark space are personal and intimately entwined with the worker, such as the bag on Johan's shoulder. It is part of him, always with him everywhere, like an extension

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of his body. He leaves it on “his” workstation. Like the personal bag, the wardrobes also convey the intimacy of the objects used—as well as the close relationships among co-workers who can recognize the owners of the clothes left on the back of the chair.

Finally, it is interesting to note that this process of object embodiment may be collective. The bonsai Vincent brought into the office is an object that belongs to a team, whose members value it highly as it represents their past collaboration on a project named “bonsai” (see picture 7). The object used to occupy the workspace despite prohibitions against its placement on the table manifests the collective presence of workers involved in the project.

Object emplacement Beyond the nature of the object-worker bond discussed above, the employees also use objects in a ritualized manner to overtly mark a spatial property. While the new managerial policies de-personified space and de-spatialized work (Sewell and Taskin, 2015), StampsCo’s employees take ownership of a place by occupying the same workspace and persistently placing the same objects there. This “dwelling” through personal artefacts (e.g., screens, keyboard, a coat or a cup of coffee) enables a sense of ownership and attachment that is socially recognized by the collective, as shown and explained by pictures 8 and 9 and their authors’ elicitations.

[Insert Pictures 8 and 9 about here]

The placement of these objects manifests the mutual reconstitution of space and body, a process that can be interpreted as especially subversive by management (Courpasson et al., 2017) because it shows objective evidence of an entirely dissident spatial apprehension. The next excerpt is from an employee who uses crumbs to appropriate space. His workstation is so dirty that no one wants to sit there. This specific object emplacement is an act of outrageous

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resistance expressing the rejection of standards perceived as absurd, sitting in overt opposition to the emptying/cleansing process embraced by management. Indeed, cleanliness is a key management principle of flexwork but, for Roland, "*it is not important.*" More fundamentally, he expresses the physical occupation of space by marking it with dirt and mess. These spots (e.g., crumbs, coffee stains, etc.) indisputably signify physical human presence at work.

My place is always covered with crumbs, it's dirty. But what's going on? Nobody wants to sit at this desk. So, it's always my place ... It's full of crumbs. And I do not clean them. It's not because I'm nonchalant, but it's because, for me, it's not important. [Roland, IT projects manager]

Object emplacement manifests concretely and visibly the direct relationship between an object and the personal ownership of a place. The objects used in photos 10 and 11 shown below (e.g., crumbs, lamp, project's picture) are mundane, yet they manifest a resistance to management's principles of flexwork by persistently grounding occupants in a space.

[Insert Pictures 10 and 11 about here]

Overall, individual interventions through object embodiment and emplacement do converge and become the corporeal markers of a collective effort to reaffirm privately owned and lived places. Workers occupy space through obtrusive and unobtrusive markers that are, we argue, all the more significant and political, as they are the core targets of managerial spatial reforms.

At the end of our fieldwork, objectal resistance appears almost "normalized." Where it was most apparent was often in teams and on floors where managers and change ambassadors appointed by project leaders have themselves stopped to play watchdogs, sometimes because they themselves doubted the relevance of these principles in a major restructuring context. The

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material traces being progressively reinstalled in the workspace show the impact of workers' resistance as power relationships related to the use of space are partially reshaped:

“At first they said ‘no more decoration’ [but we started again]. Now it’s a bit of a kind of normal thing so...and other teams are starting to do it too. It’s accepted, so we continue” [Julie, External Customer Service Manager]

“In fact, they do not ask because it was like that years ago. If I say ‘now you cannot’ [bring objects], it’s a war here. So why go to war for a Christmas tree, do you understand?” [Marc, External Customer Service Manager]

Discussion

This study provides an inquiry into how flexworkers' interactions with objects produce concrete spatial resistance. People's efforts to claim a space for themselves in the face of managerial opposition could simply signify the regretful melancholy that occurs when such causes as a “right to the desk” become lost and outdated. Research on resistance could also lead scholars and workers alike to celebrate these mundane spatialized tactics of rebellion (Munro and Jordan, 2013) as part of futile resistance (Contu, 2013), while management proceeds anyway to disrupt spatial uses at work. Our study rather follows Flood and Grindas' (2014) assertion that objects are engines of affective relationships and can be disobedient. We have highlighted that various forms of object emplacement and embodiment contribute, gradually and irregularly, to creating and recreating the spatial order in accordance with intersecting individual perceptions of space that are considerably more fluid than management's vision. This resistance through objects has indeed, we argue, a political significance and concrete impacts on the actual use of space.

Objectal resistance

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In this paper, we have analysed objects as creating specific «territories» (Raffestin, 2012) that affect workers in their very use of physical location. We show that objects influence directly the individual relationship with place. We concur with Smith and Bugni (2006: 124) who state: “... *physical buildings, places and objects act as agents to shape our thoughts and actions*”. This supports the idea that workplaces and spaces are the product of inter-relations between people and things.

Following this idea, our first contribution is to craft the notion of objectal resistance to explain the interaction between employees and personal objects in their attempt to resist top down spatial change. Theoretically, this leads to conceive spatial resistance as a set of activities that are co-constructed with objects, through an articulation with their users permitted by a joint process of *embodiment* and *emplacement*. Thus, resistance appears here as the result of a mutually constituting effort, whereby *bonding* with a particular object and *placing* it in a particular place are gestures that progressively influence not only the physical configuration of space, but also the representation that workers build over time of the ‘proper’ use of space. Bonding with (embodiment) and placing objects (emplacement) reinstall individual bodies in specific spots where they are not supposed to be. This objectal view of resistance introduces a relational dynamic between objects and the resisters and clarifies the political potential of this very relation: objects establish relations with resisters through their very materiality, as well as through their contribution to practices that overtly challenge the hegemonic view of place ownership that is communicated by managerial decisions and official narratives of space.

Consequently, we contribute to the literature on spatial resistance by proposing a concept of objectal resistance such that resisting activities are co-constructed with objects and the meanings that are associated with them. Employees’ interventions on the use and meaning of space through objects’ embodiment and emplacement are capable to modify the overarching conception of the workspace at StampsCo. Typically, they show that leaving crumbs on a desk

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is not only a question of cleanliness: it is a means to develop and physically expose individual spatial ownership. We argue that this object-infused view of spatial resistance helps illustrate how resistance to flexwork is jointly created by workers and objects, acknowledging the entangled relationship the two generate in developing resisting strategies that have concrete material effects. As such, objects have a constitutive role in how people make sense of their work environment (Humphries and Smith, 2018).

Contributions to studies on resistance at work

Our study leads to address first, the issue of resistance effectiveness and second, to go beyond the dualism covert/overt resistance.

First, it shows the effectiveness of individual interventions that may be classified as everyday resistance (Scott, 1985) and therefore, more often than not situated below the radar of politics. This form of resistance « *stops well short of collective outright defiance (...) the ordinary weapons of relatively powerless groups: foot dragging, dissimulation, fake compliance (...)* » (Scott, 1985: 29). Acts of that sort are termed “everyday” because of their commonplace, ordinary nature, i.e., initiatives that « *make no headlines* » (Scott, 1985: xvii) and have few potential to make a difference. On the contrary, our study shows that the sort of personal objects and matters used by workers to oppose managerial top down spatial change (e.g., a family picture, a personal handbag, or a plant) through everyday individual interventions can gain a political significance in struggles over the convenient use of space.

Organizational research has also studied the symbolic power of objects, acknowledging that they « *provide tools to make action meaningful* » (Humphries and Smith, 2014: 478; Hardy et al., 2005; Rowlinson et al., 2010). This stream of research, while demonstrating that objects can trigger stories and memories, accounts for the *meaningfulness* of resisting efforts, but does not address their political *effectiveness* in producing concrete impacts on working environments. Our data rather indicate that StampsCo employees do engage in meaningful

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activities that do have a political impact and mutually affect material objects (Parmiggiani and Mikelsen, 2013). More particularly, we show that employees are physically “back in”, despite pervasive managerial strategies of flexwork. This result might seem surprising with respect to the numerous accounts of ineffectual resistance; our point is not to over-romanticize Stampsco employees' resisting stories. However, we illustrate how objects are more than merely passive containers of human interaction, how they become possible agents of social change, permitted by acts of resistance (Parmiggiani and Mikalsen, 2013). In this view, objects are not simply the decorum of spatial resistance but active participants in the interactions between people and their spatial environment. Objects are therefore not politically neutral. Rather, they are fundamental ingredients in how workers make sense of spatiality, thereby acquiring a political force through their joint embodiment and emplacement.

In other words, even if the low-profile techniques that we highlight in the paper hardly connect with explicit political motives, they do produce political effects. Leir's (1988) research on an indigenous ethnic group in Mexico already showed how the use of everyday objects such as traditional weapons and textiles allowed people to be self-sufficient, thereby resisting the dominant political economy. May (1999) studied workers' resistance in terms of discretionary break times, stipulating their control over working hours. We contend that our notion of objectal resistance is important in this respect, because the effectual dimensions of resistance have tended to disappear in recent research, rather favouring studies emphasizing a subjective perspective (Thomas and Davies, 2005). Notions such as ambiguous accommodation (Prasad and Prasad, 1998) have illuminated the separation between politically harmless forms of resistance and those that are likely to alter the “*structural forms of subordination that are inscribed in material practices*” (Courpasson, 2017: 1281). Our study is a contribution to the latter.

Second, the notion of objectal resistance also permits to engage in the debate related to the covert/overt dualism in resistance studies. Everyday practices of resistance such as those we study usually situate political relationships *against* the visibility of actions. For instance Rodet and Modigliani's (1995) study of French villagers who hid Jewish people during the Second World War demonstrated the necessity of keeping such *explicit* opposition to the Nazi regime *unseen* by authorities; on the other hand, everyday resistance through indirect strategies can be observable yet not recognized as political (Kanuha, 1999; Scott, 1985). We argue that the use of personal objects and matters to resist spatial change situates resistance *between* recognizable and non-recognizable politics (Fleming, 2016). Put differently, the impact of objectal resistance results from its playing on *both* overt and covert terrains, on *both* observable and hidden tactics. This suggests that the ordinary nature of objects used to reoccupy places stipulates indeed to authorities that their presence is not subversive at first sight, while it is interpreted by workers as a physical proof of personal spatial occupation as we explain above. Resistance through objects is therefore both physically tangible and touchable, but politically barely perceptible. This lack of explicit recognition from management partly explains the power of personal objects in resistance to spatial change: they should be nowhere, but they could be anywhere. Desks should be cleaned and food leftovers thrown in the trash. Family pictures should be put in a drawer, but they are not. They are indeed *ostensibly* displayed on desks. Locating the object here and not elsewhere is politically meaningful for the worker, re-shaping the space to enable a peculiar « *sense of place* » (Walsh, 1992: 12). The conjunction of explicit materiality and political imperceptibility makes objectal resistance effective, we argue, because management, while seeing material traces everywhere, feels no need to intervene on such mundane matters. Resistance is here simply apparent to culturally aware observers, such as employees themselves. As such, as Scott observes: « *A harvest laborer who steals paddy from his employer (is saying) that his need for rice takes precedence over the*

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formal property rights of his boss » (1985: 301), making the statement political, however silent.

Leaving crumbs on a desk, or clothes and pictures, similarly constitute acts of subtle subversion not obvious to non-culturally aware observers despite their visibility. This result permits to go beyond dualisms in resistance research, showing the complexity of the covert/overt duality (Courpasson, 2017; Mumby et al., 2017), as well as the interrelations between recognition and postrecognition politics (Fleming, 2016). In other words, the impact of resistance through/with objects results from their occupation of a place they do not belong to in the eyes of authorities. They create *perceptible* imperfections in the use of place. This very *physical* effect emerges from the unexpected relationship between a worker and the object in space. In that respect, there is no opposition between overt and covert acts of resistance; instead, interventions through objects are both covert and overt. In a similar vein, the politics of objectal resistance are coherent with a purpose of recognition, because they are ostensible and must be seen to be effective; but they are also inherently “post-recognition”, because employees “*not really resist it in a direct sense*” (Fleming, 2016: 107); we propose that they also achieve their objectives of re-inhabiting the place without entering into explicit games of negotiation, so as to avoid “*a game that only penalizes*” (Fleming, 2016: 108). Objects being silently put back on the desks permit to deploy social autonomy while in a way, “socially disappear” as Fleming puts it, while in the same movement, showing that the edicts of power regarding spatial occupation are not acceptable. Emplacing these objects even suggests that those edicts are pointless, without overtly claiming their pointlessness. Personal objects are therefore effective while being imperceptible, thereby turning employees' anonymity to their advantage (Fleming, 2016).

Conclusion

The perspective we adopt in this paper is concerned with “*how social processes create and in turn, are influenced by, human artefacts such as tools and other material objects*” (Whiteman and Cooper, 2011: 889). According to this approach, “*objects are entwined in the social fabric*

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of organizations” (Humphries and Smith, 2014: 482). We therefore approach spatial resistance as partly based upon the intimacy of the bonds between people and objects (Lowe, 2004; Jarzabkowski et al., 2013) and we offer an understanding of how personal objects permit workers to define the workplace as “*brought into being through specific performances*” (Gregson and Rose, 2000, in Lewis, 2008: 131)

Thus, this paper analyzes intentional workplace activities and interventions performed through the interactive actions of people and personal objects. We have shown that the role of objects in spatial resistance is central because they constitute the material traces left by specific struggles between antagonistic usages of space. This object-infused view of spatial resistance helps to convey how resistance to flexwork results from the interplay between workers and objects, acknowledging the entangled relationship the two generate in developing resisting strategies

This paper is particularly relevant to current workplace transformations: it has emphasized the role of objects in conflicts over space organization in the era of the « *disappearing workplace* » (Dale and Burrell, 2008: 117). The politics of space as designed at StampsCo show that no fixed and stable sense of place is said to be possible anymore. Any attempt at marking such volatile places in a sustained manner may therefore be read as antagonistic with prevalent narratives of the flexible place. This is largely evidenced during spatial change initiatives, when decisions are made on whether or not to authorize display of personal items (Burrell, 2001; Dale and Burrell, 2008). This makes the material manifestation of resisting acts particularly interesting for studies of workplace transformation: if spatial change initiatives aim to remove any sense of stability and personal spatial ownership, the paper illuminates how gestures of objectal occupation take on a political meaning by exposing oppositional views of workspace resting upon notions of stability, continuity and belonging. Marking the place with personal items (Warren, 2006) is a political affirmation of identity and spatial ownership that we show

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to be still possible in times of neoliberal flexibility. Our study has particularly highlighted the *politicality* of interactions between workers and objects in shaping and reshaping of the workplace. These persistent and visible interventions—i.e., embodiment and emplacement of objects—are not simply minor deviations, though they do not indicate any collective overt rebellion against managerial policies of space. For each worker, however, they do become a stark refusal to disappear beneath the imperatives of managerial spatial regulation. This ‘objectal’ resistance leads workers to insist upon a right to claim and remake certain portions of the corporate physical and symbolic geographies. Through everyday subversive gestures of that sort, this right is not merely asserted, but acted upon in creative and ostensible ways.

Future research on spatial politics should further this objectal perspective to show the political dimension of the object-space nexus, articulating the various processes through which sophisticated forms of resistance strongly reassert the life-worlds of workers in today's workplace. It is all the more important to continue to study material and object-infused dimensions of resistance at work, as future social configurations of workspaces may well be founded on conceptions of a compulsory physical distance that may fundamentally affect the ‘lived’ dimension of space. The recent covid crisis could potentially constitute another context to consider the political role of objects in resisting the invasion of work at home. For instance, future research could investigate how workers resist the colonization of work in their private spaces by positioning personal objects where work has to be performed. Reversely, one could observe situations where professional objects (like a screen or a chair) are used to mark that a limited part of the private space is dedicated to work. Therefore, objectal resistance through embodiment and emplacement contributes to produce an office space resisting to the primary private use of that space, which may help to rethink the current growing confusion between work and home. Finally, the difficult “back to the office” post-Covid move will certainly constitute another area for resistance expression and the political role of objects should be

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investigated with greater attention as the political power they embed is far from being negligible.

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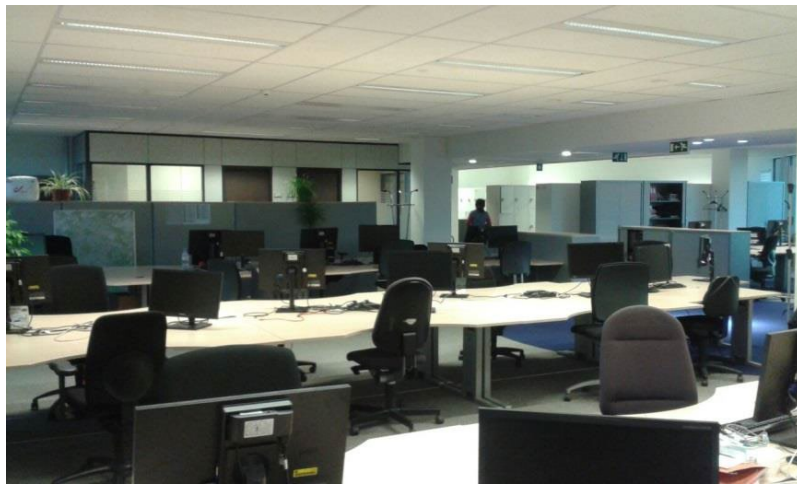
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Picture 1 – Typical office layout



Picture 2 – *Since there are no other meeting rooms available, I sit here, and I know it is quiet.*
[Pieter, account manager]



Picture 3 – *This was the standard workstation ... a screen, a laptop, a chair, a desk and a shelf tablet.*
[Patrick, risk manager]



Picture 4 – *The lockers. When I arrive, I put my bag aside, I take my computer and I work.*
[Maxime, IT developer]



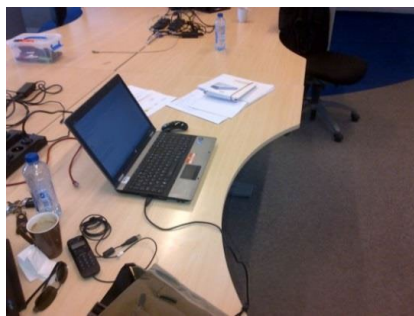
Picture 5 – *I think we have to find the right balance between what is work and what is personal ... It is important to have little things that remind us of the family. [Didier, media developer for external clients, commenting on his children's drawings on his locker]*



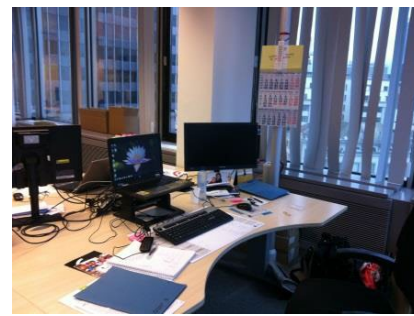
Picture 6 – *This is what I explained: the double screens. This person always sits in the same place and the desk is elevated. [Patrick, risk manager]*



Picture 7 – *Everything there is prohibited. The bonsai comes from a project called "bonsai." Since then, we drag it everywhere with us. One day it will disappear too. [Vincent, head of account management]*



Picture 8 – *But you should know that these two places are ours. That's all. (...) I think we had an unconscious need to put something there that clearly shows that this is our place. [Jean-Pierre, senior account manager]*



Picture 9 – *That blotter is a little symbol to show that it is my territory. And my bottle of water and all that, it remains always on the desk despite being forbidden. That does not mean that no one else can take my place when I'm not there ... it does not bother me at all ... It is only to show that it's my place, that's where I work and where I feel good ... yes, here ... in the little corner there ... [Ellen, executive assistant]*



Picture 10 – *We see this fabulous colorful table, which adds a little color to our space. We see photos of the different projects. We even put up the cards we sent to colleagues when we've gone on vacation (...) We try in our own way to personalize the space.* [Damien, head of knowledge management]



Picture 11 – *There are pictures, and we personalize the space with a cosy lamp ... This lamp makes the space cosier.* [Sylvie, executive assistant]

Table 1 – Interviews and photo-elicitation

<i>Employee and job title</i>	<i>length</i>	<i># pictures</i>
Floor A		
1. Annie, senior manager external clients	52'67''	0
2. Martin, coordinator internal clients ICT	46'47''	0
3. Julie, head of department external clients	58'50''	0
4. Marc, head of department external clients	73'54''	7
5. André, head of department internal clients ICT	49'40''	0
6. Pierre, project manager Work Transformation	86'55''	11
7. Adrien, facility manager	54'29''	8
Floor B		
8. Déborah, internal communicator	92'29''	4
9. Vanessa, change manager	62'03''	3
10. Katty, account manager	67'38''	5
11. Patrick, risk manager	92'06''	21
12. Jacques, solutions manager	66'01'	5
13. Camille, internal communicator	56'46''	9
14. Pieter, account manager	73'29''	3
15. Louise, change manager	49'20''	2
16. Damien, head of knowledge management	92'11'	6
17. Chris, procurement officer	68'03''	5
18. Bart, project manager Work Transformation	54'42''	0

19. Sylvie, executive assistant	56'49''	6
Floor E		
20. Marijke, account manager	56'27''	1
21. Roland, account manager	67'36''	0
22. Johan, head of stock management	65'55'	0
23. Ellen, executive assistant	57'03''	8
24. Françoise, account manager	40'05''	0
25. Koen, solutions manager	55'22''	5
26. Jean-Pierre, senior account manager	86'48''	8
27. Frédéric, head of account management	47'49''	0
28. Olivier, senior project manager	55'41''	0
29. Julien, products manager	65'15'	0
30. Tinne, administrative assistant	74'06''	3
31. Didier, media developer external clients	75'02''	19
32. Vincent, head of account management	64'03''	4
Floor G		
33. Michel, price manager	50'20''	4
Floor J		
34. Fabien, data center manager	57'08''	7
Floor K		
35. Roland, IT projects manager	65'57''	0
36. Maxime, IT developer	70'37''	9
37. Grégory, IT programmer	49'34''	0
38. John, external IT consultant	68'38''	1
Floor L		
39. Stefan, IT support manager	76'51''	0
40. Luc, IT support manager	77'17''	0
41. Charles, head of IT	41'23''	2
42. Alexandre, senior manager internal customer service	71'57''	0
43. Benoit, senior IT projects manager	42'59''	0
44. Christian, IT support manager	51'38''	0
45. Vivian, head of IT services and products	53'43''	1
Floor O		
46. Guillaume, head of change management and leader 'NWOW'	74'35''	0
47. Antoine, leader Work Transformation	92'29''	271
48. Antoine, head of change management	84'57''	5
49. Dirk, VPHR	84'57''	0
50. Jean, VP Finance	54'30''	0

Table 2 – Data analysis, Second-order categories

<i>Illustrative verbatims</i>	<i>Second-order sub categories</i>	<i>Second-order categories</i>
<i>I feel like a snail and walking around all day with my desk on my back. [When you have a meeting], you have to start tidying up [Jean-Pierre]</i>		
<i>We have a laptop (...) but we have to dismantle it every evening to reassemble it every morning [Chris]</i>		
<i>For me, it means that everything can be replaced in 4 seconds [Johan]</i>		
<i>[Y]ou have to clean desk and you cannot drink coffee [Damien]</i>		
<i>When I started to work here, I had a closet full of all things (...) now, I have nothing anymore [Grégory]</i>		
<i>We developed something hygienic, without bacteria (...). Our relationship with other persons also becomes a bit sterile [Roland]</i>		
<i>Me, for example, I have a bag that I have on my shoulder that I always put on my desk. That's my thing for me to appropriate the space [Johan]</i>		
<i>[about the postcards that the members of the team send from their vacations] They are on a board (...) This is something we do on behalf of the team and so it's a bit for everyone and we display them. I don't even know if it's allowed by the concept, these boards... [Vanessa]</i>		
<i>My place is always covered with crumbs; it's dirty (...). Nobody wants to sit at this desk. So, it's always my place [Roland]</i>		
<i>There is almost no more clean desk, everyone has a place and puts all their belongings there and leaves them, everyone is almost always in the same place [Grégory].</i>		

