



# **Tuning By Heart: Organizing to the Verdict of the Flesh**

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## **Résumé :**

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La présent contribution part du débat concernant le corps humain dans les organisations. Ici, on explore le vecteur d'influence venant du corps vers l'organisation, c'est-à-dire, on se demande quel est l'impact du corps sur l'organiser. Pour cela, on utilise le concept de 'verdict de la chair,' l'articulant avec la notion spinozienne de rencontre. Un étude ethnographique d'un jardin partagé comme cas révélateur est présenté, notamment en exposant une organisation qui est bénévole et où des travaux corporels sont réalisés. Les résultats apportent trois contributions. En premier, l'étude contribue avec la littérature autour des jardins partagés montrant comment ce genre d'organisation peut être envisagé comme ayant le verdict de la chair dans son centre. En deuxième, le protocole d'accueil est analysé comme un façon de permettre à nouveaux membres d'intégrer l'organisation et de produire des rencontres joyeuses dans leurs projets. Finalement, on analyse des conséquences non souhaitées du processus, particulièrement en ce que concerne les conditions pour le débat démocratique à l'intérieur de l'organisation.

**Mots-clés :** verdict de la chair, ethnographie organisationnel, rencontres joyeuses, jardin partagé, corps

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# **Tuning By Heart: Organizing to the Verdict of the Flesh**

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The present paper aims to explore the impact of embodiment upon organizing, drawing from an ethnographic study of a voluntary organization in which bodywork is performed. As the Cartesian dominance over the literature was weakened, the divide between mind and body, as well as the project of domination of nature were challenged and room was carved for further investigation around embodiment. Over twenty years ago, outside of Organization and Management Studies (OMS), Acker (1990) discussed the organization of bodies at work, and Grosz (1994) was influential in establishing the body as dual, on the one hand as flesh and bones, and on the other the body as capable of skills and capacities which are discursively and socially invested. Within OMS, Karen Dale (2000) set the critique of the body that was (and still is, to a large extent) assumed to be dead and still matter, subject to be dissected for scientific investigation and rearranged for optimization. Hassard, Holliday & Willmott (2000) on the same year edited a book that provided more depth to the debate, shaping the so-called ‘body turn.’ Thus, the notion of the body was repositioned into “an ongoing project, managed by the individual. The becomings of the body are determined by the social world that the individual body operates within,” (Styhre, 2004, p. 104). In OMS, bodies are considered in their performing acts, however, the active role of the body is still underexplored. With this in mind, this paper considers how the agency of flesh influences the organizing of a French shared garden.

Although I concur with the idea that social forces influence and enable the body, it is also important to take into account that bodies have an agency of their own in the co-constitution of embodiment and organizing, which puts their ‘manageable’ character into question. Seeing the body as something completely ‘manageable’ is, on the one hand, deceitful, an illusion; and in the other hand a key insight to the overall condition in which we find ourselves in the present historical moment. The unmanageable character of the human body, in its unpredictability, recalcitrant and ‘wild’ ways of expressing itself ought to be taken into consideration, and along with Harding et al. (2021), I state that more research is due in this agentic character of the body. The authors have sought to enlarge our understanding of the agency of flesh (a notion that they collapse with that of the body) on the constitution of working bodies/selves. In the present study, however, I give focus to the agency of flesh onto organizing, and not to the



conformation of the organizational member. The ‘wilderness’ of the agency of the flesh is understood by the idea that bodies are affected in dynamics that do not appear entirely in conscious representation, and that a judgment happens within those opaque dynamics where bodies seek to expand their capacity to act and to affect, attracting what enhances its capacities and rejecting what diminishes them. These have been named joyful and sad encounters, respectively (Sampson, 2016; Thanem & Wallenberg, 2015). Further, joyful encounters can be qualified around their passive or active character, the first of which when a body is affected joyfully in an encounter, which prompts desire for repetition and authority; on the second case, a body affects others, and fosters self-organization and novelty. Analyzing encounters, I claim, is key to understanding agentive flesh.

This paper presents an ethnographic study as a revelatory case of an organization where the agency of flesh is at the center, namely a shared garden (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 229). Gardening activities involve bodywork with different tools, the soil, and dealing with the plants, with water and insects, which amounts to a field where one can more easily observe the body. Additionally, the entertainment of the garden is held by an association, and the entirety of the activities that happen are performed voluntarily. That means that any serious constraints to the agency of flesh, or imposition of sad encounters would be less likely to occur. In the ethnographic study, I try to comprehend the phenomena around situations in which agentive flesh are at the center, and focus on the notions of joyful encounters as capable of offering a meaningful systematization of the empirical data (cf. Sandberg & Alvesson, 2021).

The contributions of this paper are threefold. Firstly, the case is made for the idea that the studied organization is one where the verdict of the flesh is at the center of its activities. That leads to valuing the activities in themselves, in detriment for an exterior finality, such as increasing of productivity. The second contribution is the analysis around welcoming protocol, as an organizational device put in place that tries to balance the erratic nature of the flesh’s agency with the continuity of the organization. It seeks to facilitate the entrance of newcomers, and in that, it produces the rise of a few personalities who informally become central members, as it puts special importance in passive joyful encounters. Finally, the last contribution is the finding that the emphasis put on joyful encounters leads to avoidance of conflict and therefore to limitations to debate and democratic checks of organizational functioning.

## **2. FLESHING OUT ORGANIZING**

A considerable amount of literature within OMS has addressed the human body in its ‘living’ and ‘moving’ quality, and has built a critique of its conception as dead, still matter. The



human body is no longer seen as a passive entity upon which organizations can freely create and modulate whatever they intend (e. g. Dale, 2000; Gärtner, 2013; Hassard et al., 2000), be it by means of managers, charismatic leaders, or even horizontally-achieved consensus. Rather, the human body – nay, human bodies come into play as agentic entities. Their agency flows differently according to a myriad of conditions at each specific setting, regarding what the organization is and what it aims at doing, what role does each person play, how do people interact with each other, and what are their different characteristics – in multidimensional lines such as class, age, ability, gender, race, weight and so on. The human body, however, is not a passive matter that takes whatever form the organization molds, it has an agency of its own, and influences organizing as well. Specifically, the impacts of embodiment onto organizing are still under-explored in OMS literature.

While studies of the body have been established in the literature for quite some time, studies emphasizing the active role of the body have only gone as far as establishing its existence and sketching some of its workings in the creation of the organization or of the worker (or organizational member). Harding, Gilmore & Ford (2021, p. 1) posit “the need for more empirically derived understanding of the agency of flesh in the performative corporealization of working, embodied selves”, to which I concur. The authors propose the notion of ‘agentic flesh,’ conceptualizing ‘flesh’ as “[something] that is separate from the ‘I’ who might claim it as ‘my’ property, ‘my’ flesh, while concurrently an intrinsic part of that ‘I’”, and after collapse the distinction between body and flesh and nonsensical, speaking of ‘body/flesh.’ The authors dwell on the methodological difficulty to flesh out (pun intended) this agency of the flesh, and note the role of flesh as “judge” of one’s actions (Harding et al., 2021, p. 14), that is, as something that issues a ‘verdict’ towards organizational activities, as something ‘meriting’ sensations of shame, pleasure, sadness, joy and so on. The authors draw from Judith Butler and Karen Barad’s philosophies to develop their argument, paying specific attention to micro-moments where acts that reiterate norms enable the subject into being. They try to identify and to theorize upon those micro-moments in which one becomes aware of one’s individuated body and rearranges its inscribed norms.

My contribution, however, aims at an empirically derived understanding of the agency of flesh in the constitution of organizations, not that of the organizational member itself, in these acts that enable not only the subject, but also organizing. In order to do that, it is useful to pay attention to the extra-rational capacity that the human body has to judge and to order stimuli. It does so in order to expand its temporal existence and its capacities, specifically in



what relates to its ability to compose with the enviroining bodies in a way that is beneficial to itself, yet often opaque to our understanding. In other words, the body invests its existence with a normativity of its own that seeks “to persevere by entering into affective relations with other bodies that enhance their capacities,” or what has been called a ‘joyful encounter’ (Thanem & Wallenberg, 2015, p. 241).

An encounter cannot be planned beforehand to be joyful, as bodies change their capacities and characteristics over time. Additionally, the possibility of joyful encounters to happen within an organization have been questioned, due to their regulation and proneness to relations of domination. I concur on the conditionality exposed by the authors, that the possibility of joyful encounters depends “on how our inclusion in the organization puts us into contact with bodies and ideas that enhance our capacities to affect and be affected by others.” (Thanem & Wallenberg, 2015, p. 246). The body operates a normativity that is immanent from itself, judging by appealing to affects and sensations, being capable of changing its own norms, performing a wild, normative mobility that might not be understandable from the perspective of existing norms that are alien to it (O’Shea, 2019, p. 274; Safatle, 2011). In this way, I perform a slight repositioning in what has been coined ‘the verdict of the flesh,’ claiming one can assess its expression through analyzing (joyful) encounters.

Besides the ‘joyful’ or ‘sad’ character of encounters, they can be qualified as active or passive. In the passive register, when one is affected in a joyful encounter, the body is prone to imitate what affected it, to try to have the same encounter reproduced. It fosters a craving for sameness, for obedience and authority. As for the active register, to affect others in a joyful encounter prompts bodies to go beyond, to change the original encounter, “enabling them to form new and mutually empowering encounters outside the original encounter” (Sampson, 2016, p. 60).

Further exploring the impacts of embodiment onto organizing would help increase understanding of actually existing relations that compose organizations and people in it, as opposite to what may be prescribed formally (cf. Dalton, 2013). That lens may explain gaps between what is formally decided or prescribed to happen on the one hand and what actually happens on the other hand. It may also not only contribute to the overall debate around the body in OMS (e. g. Fotaki & Daskalaki, 2021; Johansson et al., 2017), but also increase understanding about underlying factors influencing the arrangement of organizational relations and their implications for organizational ethics (e. g. Hancock, 2008; Pérezts et al., 2015; Tyler, 2019).



After Cartesian influence could be superseded in OMS, studies of the body and studies of space emerged as two sides to the same coin. That is because there is no space as such, space emerges from the uses it is given, from the bodies that occupy it. Alternatively, bodies do not exist in themselves, rather they are always in relation to their environment and cannot be understood outside of these relationships – they are “always already embodied spaces and spatial bodies.” (Styhre, 2004, p. 103). Analyses of embodiment relating to the organization have been done beautifully in the literature. Hales, Riach & Tyler (2019) develop a three-fold analytical framework that puts embodiment in relation to processes of embedding prompted by the organization’s space configurations and encoded in communication processes that mold expectations. Dale and Latham (2015) expose empirically how embodiment is connected to the material reality of its surroundings. While these studies are rather convincing, I believe a contribution is still missing that can help us better understand the vector of influence that comes from the body onto the organization, that privileges an exposition of the impacts of embodiment onto organizing. With this in mind, I turn to an ethnographic study, to understand further the meanings around an organization that is voluntary and that features many forms of bodily work.

### **3. METHOD**

#### **3.1. RESEARCH SETTING**

This study draws on an ethnographic research of a French community garden, of which I speak under the pseudonym of Slope Garden. The garden is situated in a central neighborhood of a French city of about 150,000 inhabitants, halfway up a mountain, allowing for a beautiful view of the city and the surrounding mountains. It is about 800 square meters in size and exists as a garden for over a decade. Slope Garden was built around the principles of permaculture, which exclude the use of chemical products in its activities, and aims at increasing biodiversity by means of working with positive interactions among plants, insects and other environmental features, such as wind and sunlight availability. It grows vegetables, has about a dozen fruit trees, a site of honey production, aromatic and medicinal plants, a wood-fired oven, sites for composting organic residues, a dry toilet, two ponds, one of them being home to a fish and the second one with the intent of providing water and prey insects to birds. Slope Garden is also home to a hen and a chicken that are not raised to be productive of any good for human consumption. Moreover, it features a structure for collection of rainwater and a well, but otherwise does not have access to piped water nor to electricity or gas. It also has a ‘cave’ under which gardening tools are stored, along with a table and benches where conversations usually occur. There are no individual lots and all of the work and all of the produce are collective. An





association composed by volunteers runs the garden. The garden has a small door entry in the midst of tall stonewalls, and only administrative council members and beekeepers have access to its keys.

Members more or less regularly open it, up to about three times a week. There is a sign that is (supposedly) placed on the entry during openings, which invites the public to walk in, look around, and get involved. It is only accessible by foot, as it is situated along the stairways that go up the mountain. The terrain is owned by the city hall and is part of the lot leased to a museum that surrounds the garden, and there are no fees charged by the public authorities for its use. The association is financed with annual pay-what-you-want membership fees and with the sale of the honey it produces – the rest of the produce is not commercialized. During the period of the study, exceptionally, the association was granted a funding by the city hall and raised funds on an online crowdfunding platform to renew the water-collecting structure.

**Figure 1. Slope Garden's map. Retrieved from Slope Garden's website on January 5th, 2022.**



The association features an administrative council that is formally composed of a treasurer and co-presidents. The number of members in the council fluctuates over time, but today features about a dozen. There are other members of the association that are not a part of the council but that joined by paying the pay-what-you-want annual fee of membership. Accounting for how many members the organization features is not a straightforward task as



those who receive updates on a mailing list or a WhatsApp group, those who paid the fee to be a member and those who are actually engaged in the garden's activities are three different groups. The first one, receiving notifications, is in the order of the hundreds of people in the e-mail, and about sixty-five on WhatsApp. The second group, paying adherents, are about fifty people, and finally the people that actually show up and interact drops down to about two dozens of people, though it is difficult to precise an exact number. On top of that, in every opening, it is common for people who are simply passing by to enter the garden and inquire about its functioning and at times perform some activity, or simply pass some time there, and so it takes a while before their membership becomes widely known. Slope Garden maintains close relations with its neighboring organizations, such as the museum that is immediately to its side and the association of the neighborhood where it is situated, and other organizations with similar interests such as wildlife protection associations. It does so by promoting joint activities and maintaining informal contact with them.

Slope Garden has changed all its members since its foundation, as people became involved in other activities over the years and left it. Today it is mostly composed of well-educated people of French origin; those from other nationalities are about half a dozen people. Accordingly, the language spoken is French. As of age, the group is largely composed of adults in their third to fifth decade of life, though some older people as well as some younger ones are also present. The distribution is fairly well divided between men and women, though gender-dissident people (transgender, non-binary etc.) are absent. Likewise, members are all able-bodied.

This amounts to a good fit towards answering the research question. It is so because a group of people organized in a voluntary association that has as its main object activities that require bodily work – mainly dealing with the plants and the land – amounts to a setting in which the 'verdict of the flesh' is at the center. People perform the organization into being through its events and material products (such as harvests of fruits, honey, new social relations and wooden-oven baked pizzas). In these activities, very few constraints are imposed to the verdict of the flesh. Anyone can walk away or refuse to engage with any given activity practically without penalty or, analogously, choose to become more involved and to gain more responsibilities and influence within the organization, with very little restrictions: namely, having the time and the ability to do the tasks involved. This amounts to a revelatory case (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 229), providing important conditions for the agential character of flesh to be visible. To comprehend the phenomena at hand in depth, I conducted an ethnographic study.





### 3.2. DATA COLLECTION

The data of this ethnographic study consists of two integrated forms of empirical data, namely, participant observations on site, amounting to about 40 hours of observations, complemented by twelve interviews with participants. Additionally, archival data such as meetings minutes and the garden's website were also marginally used, and two meetings of the administrative council were attended, and one participation on an association's fair<sup>1</sup>. I already had access to the site, as I became a member of the association a few months before having decided to conduct a study there. Once I made this decision, I disclosed it to participants. They said it was very common for people to conduct studies there, and a message was sent to the members of the administrative council to communicate them of the study. At times, members were curious about the study; at times, they simply did not care, but at all times no opposition to the research was manifested. Furthermore, Slope Garden is very open to new members, and it was not difficult to eventually become a part of the administrative council. The fact that I was new not only to the garden, but to the continent as well, having recently moved from South America, allowed me to play the role of the 'legitimate incompetent.' Therefore, I was able to discuss how and why tasks are to be made at more length than would be expected of more experienced members, allowing for more depth in the data.

As for the observations, they occurred as visits to the garden's openings which at times lasted as little as one hour, and others up to seven hours in a single visit. This is because at times activities consisted in planting and trimming the garden, but at times there were whole-day joint efforts for the renewal of the water-collecting structure. This is as long as the openings go; longer visits such as whole-day or overnight immersions are not possible nor are experienced by any member. They happened between April 2021 and January 2022. The data fit well with our research as they allow the researcher to examine the events in depth, and to draw not only from what has been said, and from the overt activities, but also to dwell on how it felt, to get closer to what was unsaid or was ineffable in them.

This allows for a theoretical contribution that helps us to achieve "comprehensive accounts of how people make sense of their reality and of themselves. [And m]oving beyond these and pointing to some unrecognized key aspect or quality" (Sandberg & Alvesson, 2021, p. 496). I take into account my own presence in the field, as has been widely debated in the

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<sup>1</sup> What is reported is what exists of the research so far. Data collection is still taking place and seeks to complement observations through a longer period of time, which is important especially because seasonality is very relevant for a garden.



literature (Field-Springer, 2020; Gherardi, 2019). Data is not understood as something already existing ‘out there’ that is collected in the process of research; rather it is created in the very act of conducting the research, and might change how the researcher comes to perceive the world, which fits well with my observations in the status of a complete participant. I am a ‘white’<sup>2</sup>, able-bodied, cisgender and heterosexual Brazilian immigrant male in the end of my third decade of life, and a graduate student. I often went to the garden with my life partner and I matured my status of fluency in the French language along the months the study was conducted. The relations and interactions that sprung inevitably did so according to these characteristics. Since the activities in the garden always require the use of the hands, I usually wrote down jottings of the observations on a notepad on my cellphone while walking home after the visits, and later on expanded them into full observation diaries. There were no preconceived observation schedules, rather I tried to capture ‘everything’ (cf. Neyland, 2007, p. 18). Therefore, I followed what Emerson, Fretz and Shaw (2011, p. 18) call “the experimental style,” which increases the immersion in the life-world of the organization while on site, compensating for the rather short periods that it happened each time, and is fitting the situation that the researcher needs to gain familiarity with the field.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted around key themes seeking to capture different perspectives about the garden as an organization, with people in a variety of positions regarding their involvement with it. The interviews ranged from about thirty minutes to one hour and fifteen minutes, and occurred between November 2021 and January 2022. The set was selected to feature people engaging with different activities, and with different levels of involvement in the organization, as well as new comers and people who are leaving it, with the intention of gathering a wide range of (embodied) perspectives. They took place at coffeehouses, at the homes of interviewees or at my home, when in person, or were conducted online. They began with questions about when and why the interviewee got to know and became involved with the garden, and how their integration process happened. After, a few questions were made about their activities in the garden, how they were decided and how they felt about them. Then, I asked some questions about how people organize in the garden and how they feel about it. Additionally, I invited the interviewees to share stories they lived in the garden, and whatever else they were willing to add. I sought to ask for what interviewees meant in what they said, as not to have anything tacitly understood. The interviews were all recorded and later

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<sup>2</sup> I use inverted commas because what may be racialized as white in Brazil might be somewhat different from what is in France. To what extent being a non-Westerner must be factored in is debatable.



transcribed by myself with the help of a software named 'Trint'<sup>3</sup>. We now turn our attention to data analysis.

#### **4. DATA ANALYSIS**

In analyzing the data, I am conducting an iterative and inductive content analysis approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 101). I read and re-read the observational diaries and the interview transcripts, working also with the recordings of the interviews and pictures taken in the days of observations, trying to maintain memories of observations as vivid as possible and to stay close to the tone in which statements were said in the interviews. Further documentation was consulted to make sense of events mostly in their timelines. Following O'Neill et al. (2002, p. 80), conducting ethnographic research involves "re-covering and re-telling stories of lived relations, experiences, meanings, practices and actions, through immersion in the stories and lived experiences." Accordingly, coding was made in an immersive manner. Data was dealt with as an ensemble, instead of separately, to form emerging themes and allowing for the formation of 'provisional settlements' (Beane & Orlikowski, 2015; Hales et al., 2019, p. 9), aiming to maintain an embodied and reflexive approach that pays attention to when does the body manifest. Informant-centric terms informed a first cycle of coding, consisting mostly of descriptive codes. While what I am seeking to understand is not any organizational member in themselves, but the organization in its processes, what people said about how things were is to be taken to have an intrinsic validity as it shows how that particular person perceives phenomena and what meanings to they attach to them. This cycle of coding is taken as a "means for developing interpretations or analytic themes" (Emerson et al., 2011, p. 147). At following iterative cycles, coding sought to explore the provisional settlements and to categorize them, triangulating with theory in a process of double-fitting (Locke et al., 2020). I tried to pay close attention to data that contradicted theory to ensure validity (Skjott Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). Further, the process also involved writing memos as I performed the analyses, as a way to sketch reflections in a way that they can be retrieved for further elaboration, comparison and analysis. In this way, there was not a linearity of the analyses, rather I went back and forth in the different levels of coding in order to mature reflections around the analyses. Following, I turn to the resulting themes of the analyses.

##### **4.1 FLESH MAKE ITS DWELLING AMONG US: THE VERDICT OF THE FLESH AT THE CORE OF SLOPE GARDEN**

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<sup>3</sup> As the research is still ongoing, no exit of the field has occurred for the time being.



Productivity is not a priority in Slope Garden. It does not have a focus on the production of fruits or vegetables, if that was to be the case, much more attention would have to go into controlling what is growing where, and how. Instead, even though the administrative council does plan seasonally what to plant, there is no constraining schedule or further study to make sure it maximizes production. Additionally, there is no formal control of harvesting. When I was first welcomed, it was told to me that when one harvests something, they usually bring it to the table of the 'cave' and ask who would like to take it home. I have seen that happening a few times, always relating to small quantities of produce: two tomatoes one day, one bell pepper and some nuts another, one butternut squash another and so on. Particularly telling was a day in which the proposed task was to harvest plums and apples.

At this afternoon, Martina<sup>4</sup>, the person who opened the garden said to me that one task that was due was to harvest these fruits. There was already a family of three doing it. I walked to the plum tree and started harvesting, there were so many plums that fell to the ground by simply shaking the branches. A friend of mine who is not a member of the garden was meeting me in a few moments, so I messaged him asking to bring a bag. He met me there and helped us harvest the fruits. Very quickly, we filled the bag with what must have been about seven kilograms of produce. After, I brought it back to the table at the cave, as the field notes register:

I suggested to [Martina] that I could leave some of the harvest on the table, so that others could take it home, which she did not receive well. She said she would rather have me take everything home, but if I insisted, I could leave it there overnight, under the condition that I must take it home the next day at the latest. She also offered me some zucchini and a few small bell peppers that she had harvested.

It did not seem reasonable to me to take that much fruit home not only because I thought others might want it, but also because there was a good chance some of it would end up rotting if I were to try to eat it alone. She was worried that it would just be left there to rot, and wanted to avoid that someone would have to clean it up later. Harvesting produce is as much of a task as anything else is.

What is left, then, is the idea that Slope Garden's *raison d'être* are its activities themselves, to the extent that they provide the opportunity for people to let their fleshy penchants act. Walking around the garden, getting your hands in contact with the plants and the earth and so on, are all sensorially rich activities that people seek, though the reasons are not so easily described, as one interviewee puts it:

It allows me to... How to say it? To cut my... My day, to evade myself a little. [...] I don't know if... You tell me whether it is clear or not. What I say. And yes, yes, that is what allows me to... to... How to

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<sup>4</sup> The real names of the members were changed to ensure anonymity.



say it? It is a little time for me, for me to... Unwind, for me to unwind, maybe that tells you a bit more. For me, it is... I am within nature, in contact with the earth, and that, that gets me my strength back. ('Olivia,' December 2021).

The activities are not necessarily all pleasant, as plenty of plants irritate the skin, and while seeing wasps enter flowers might be a beautiful thing it is also a little unsettling to be around stinging insects. Likewise, climbing up and down the slopes is a rather tiresome activity, crouching down to deal with the plants often hurts one's back – many of the things people do there configure work, they require effort. Yet people go there voluntarily. It is as if joys and burdens enter a zone of indeterminacy at the garden, and it provides people with something they usually miss in their urban everyday lives:

So, that appeases me, already, when I physically work, that appeases my mind and when I go to the garden, the atmosphere appeases me [...]. And then, the fact of being within nature, without needs, without a reason, we are well. I am well. ('Joseph', January 2022).

Activities at the garden are performed to allow the verdict of the flesh to be in ways which otherwise would not be. This centrality of the body has impacts organizing in the way decisions are made. At a given day, there were several people at the garden preparing bouquets of aromatic plants to give away at Slope Garden's stand at an upcoming event. I took a trimming tool, some gloves and a bucket and went around collecting the plants to bring them up later to Joseph who was sorting them out and arranging them in bouquets. As I was trimming one plant, I hear him screaming something like "Wait! No! Wait a minute!" I realized he was gesturing towards the plants I had trimmed. Instinctively, I ran in his direction to understand what was wrong. He picked up some branches of one plant and said, "We are trying to make aromatic bouquets! Does this smell good to you!?" – indicating that this particular plant smelled bad. I sniffed it and answered, "Well, yes." In fact, that was my favorite smell. My answer deescalated his attitude. A little unsettled, he asked Judith, who was nearby to smell it and have a say in how good it was. She smelled it and had an undecided answer; she did not love it, but was not against it either. As a result, that particular plant remained in the bouquets.

Activities at the garden center the verdict of the flesh because they are tied to how it feels for people who do them, however personal and different these sensations and attached meanings may be. People keep coming back for the richness of smells, views and touches the garden makes available for them. For the encounters that happen there. Hence, at some level, this dynamic impacts decision-making, it becomes harder for guidelines of action to emerge and a specific order to impose itself. Rather, relations are more negotiated, ways of doing things become more open to change, as there is a collective attempt to tune them with the verdict of





the flesh, with what makes sense to people in a way that is deep and encompasses but goes beyond rational explanation.

#### **4.2 BEHOLD, ALL THINGS ARE BECOME NEW: THE WELCOMING PROTOCOL**

An important theme in this study was the informal ‘welcoming protocol.’ It is put in place and that brings new people into the organization, maintaining its ‘vitality,’ by (1) keeping accessibility open all the way up to the highest level of involvement, while (2) leaving the flesh be, that is, allowing for people to seek joyful encounters, positive verdicts of their flesh in the gardening activities, however the means for it.

By the beginning of 2020, Slope Garden had about four members in its administrative council, which was perceived to be a low figure. Before that, many of the people who were a part of it held back new members and were hesitant not only to allow them into the council but also to invite them to future openings and to become more involved (‘Beatrice,’ December 2021). The French governmental response to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 featured a very rigorous lockdown where people were suddenly forbidden to get away from their homes and most public activity was momentarily shut down. As these first restrictive measures began to be relaxed, collective gardens were one of the few spaces where people were allowed to go. As a result, Slope Garden received an unusual number of visitors around that time – people suddenly had a reason to value outdoor spaces (‘Luke,’ December, 2021). Those who were members of the administrative council at the time, and especially the treasurer Arthur seized the opportunity to get more people involved in the garden and revert the shrink in number of members, giving it a new impulse, one of the interviewees going as far as referring to the outcome as a ‘new collective’ (‘Christine,’ November 2021).

Arthur’s strategy, though not confessed as such by himself, was mentioned in several interviews and resonates with my own experience. He would welcome people who were walking in for the first time, show them around and explain briefly the garden’s activities, and encourage people to get back and become more involved. Additionally, people were encouraged to get in contact by e-mail or to join the WhatsApp group to be in the loop for Slope Garden’s openings. At that point, people were encouraged to develop their own projects on the garden and rather quickly become members of the administrative council and therefore co-presidents of Slope Garden.

More or less informally, it became a de facto protocol. The person who opened the garden performed this welcoming of people who walk in, and received those who were already known but showed up to help. Most of my own appearances at the garden happened in this



fashion. I would arrive and go to someone to ask which tasks I could perform. Different people more or less followed the same ‘protocol’ of first asking whether there was something that I already had in mind that I would like to do. If not, they would say what was it that could be done that day, or what themselves were doing – planting seedlings, trimming plants, renewing pathways. They followed by actually showing which tools could be used, where they were, where to place different things and so on, and to feel free to ask for more input on how to do things. After a few hours of work, people would usually sit around the table at the ‘cave,’ share some snacks and chat for a while. After I was more acquainted with the garden, one afternoon, Arthur invited me and my partner to help him show the garden around to people who were walking in for the first time. That way, a ‘protocol’ is set for the organization in a fashion that newly arrived people would know how to comply and would smoothly become integrated with the older members.

It is the first thing that I do [...] to open the gate, that is to block the door open, and to place the big panel that says to come in. [...] And that [...] works well, because when the door is closed [...] people wouldn’t dare to come in. But when we are at the garden, it is a public place. It is a public place that welcomes the public. And therefore the idea is that people should be able to come in, should be able to inform themselves, should be able to visit and that we can welcome them the way [Arthur] welcomed me.” (‘Martina,’ December 2021).

At the level of the administrative council new projects were taking place. One new member, Christine, had connections with an organization for the protection of birds that mentioned that it would be beneficial for the birds if the garden featured a new pond. This and other projects were debated in monthly meetings and put to practice, and the council itself grew in numbers. Some people stayed after their initial projects, others became very involved and left again after a while. The welcoming ‘protocol’ consisted in an effort to make sure people knew their way around Slope Garden while leaving them free to pursue what they sought in there. As a result, this process brought people into the organization and gave them the same formal powers as older members while informally promoted the rise of a few personalities as they became the center of relations for the newcomers, as leaving people be also meant not necessarily disclosing all that was going on and how the organization was structured. One person I interviewed did not know about the existence of an administrative council (‘Leonard,’ December 2021), another thought Arthur was the president (‘Olivia,’ December 2021), and others explicitly viewed him as a de facto president, regardless of the knowledge of the formally existing equality.

If a concentration of power in a certain sense is undeniable, its corollaries are somewhat counter-intuitive. One project that was a lot different from the others for its contrasting demands



was the renewal of the water collecting structure. Along 2021, the whole of the structure was renewed, which required a professional to design the new structure and the purchase of material. In one specific day, fifty-six bags of cement of thirty-five kilograms each were delivered to the nearest place possible by car, at the neighboring museum, requiring that people carried them towards the garden. This turned into a whole weekend of heavy-lifting work that had very little to do with the usual activities. The people who showed up for these rather burdensome tasks were precisely those that concentrate more power or were already part of the administrative council. Since Slope Garden relies heavily on people's sensations and will to participate, those more involved and therefore more 'powerful' end up stuck with the tasks nobody else wants to do. There is not much leeway for delegating tasks, and this is because there is always the possibility that people might walk away. Betting on bringing people in was what renewed Slope Garden, and that happened through the effort of maintaining pleasant experiences, or trying to maintain encounters joyful.

People organize within a framework that gives the organization cohesion. In other words, the agentic character of flesh is put in the center without it meaning that people are left loose to do whatever. Equally important is the fact that this is matched with the existence of a protocol that gives minimum instructions for people to exercise such intimate motivations for being there, building cohesion to the group, and giving way for activities that go against these motivations accordingly to the level of commitment that members already assumed. That results in accessibility to the different levels of involvement, while concentrating responsibilities by an asymmetry of information and experience.

#### **4.3 LET THIS CUP PASS FROM ME, BUT LET YOUR WILL BE DONE: CONFLICT AVOIDANCE**

This third theme centers on issues around decision making in Slope Garden's administrative council. The interviewee that was one of the two who had been in touch with the garden for the longest time in the group that spoke to me, 'Beatrice' (December, 2021), exposed the fact that she had distanced herself from the organization. This was because she thought that the processes under which decisions were made were not very convincing, that they were not very democratic and that some things with which she was in complete disagreement had happened anyway. She offered two examples, one of which had been exposed as well by other interviewees as a moment of conflict, and another that had happened before that, and which, interestingly, had been completely overseen by the other participants – in their account they either minimized the issue, or did not see it as such, whatsoever.



The first issue had happened around 2020. The land upon which the garden sits belongs to the public, but its contract is under the supervision of a neighboring museum. The director of the museum took advantage of that situation:

The director of the [museum] had called us to tell us that he had decided that we must do [...] that we must promote activities for a school group, welcome children, schools at [Slope Garden] and that if we did not do this, he would not renew our convention, that is, he did not seek to have a... He was terrible, and he did not know us. He had never been seen at the garden. He had never done the least mediation. ('Beatrice,' December 2021).

However, the knowledge that this was the situation was not easily established. This is because the museum's director had the e-mail of one of Slope Garden's members as contact, that of Arthur, and the two of them exchanged messages and had meetings without other members of the council knowing about it. That way, when Beatrice knew of the situation, the museum had already received responses given in the name of Slope Garden. Beatrice did not agree with the response that had been put in place by Arthur, which in itself is not the problem, as she puts it:

The bottom-line of the issue, of the disag-... Of the disagreement that I had was that the response, actually, that was chosen at the time, remarkably by Arthur... But... But in the end, I do not criticize Arthur. Because... Because he does plenty of things for the garden, and because he... he is great and everything. It is just that I think that there was... That there was a structural problem at the level of the association's functioning at that point, you see? ('Beatrice,' December 2021).

There were (at least) two possible responses for Slope Garden, after the director's threat: either to promote the activities, that is, to obey and maintain good relations; or to say no, and to fight back to maintain their contract. There is not a correct answer, but rather a choice, and my intent is not to debate the alternatives, but to elaborate upon that which Beatrice called a 'structural problem:' that there were no conditions for an appropriate debate among the participants. The overall tone of maintaining a centrality of good experiences and joyful encounters is congruent with the first option, and specifically to carry it out the way it was, by not bringing it to the larger group before taking any action. The issue brought to a meeting of the administrative council, but then the conditions of debate were not particularly pluralistic:

I was revolted! And I had the idea that we should not let others walk over us and that we also had rights, and that [the museum's director] did not have all the power over us. [...] And the others did not have that [idea]... The others, anyway, Arthur and notably Luke. Then, there were the newcomers that Arthur had brought to the garden and that, then, had a tendency to get behind Arthur's opinion. ('Beatrice,' December 2021).

That resonates well with the interview I had with 'Christine' (November, 2021), one of the then newcomers. She mentioned that she got in contact with the garden because Arthur presented that they had 'the need to organize an activity with children,' which the two of them



ended up doing – the imposition of the museum never showed in her interview as such. Arthur's position therefore has many merits; after all, he used the threatening situation to bring in more people to the organization and avoided completely the possibility of losing the lease of the land. It did happen, however, under two 'side-effects' for the possibility of internal debate – firstly by not effectively going through it about the issue at hand, and secondly by bringing in new people who were under important asymmetry of information, and effectively of power. The idea of maintaining the occurrence of joyful encounters is congruent with these actions, which hardly makes surprising the support found in another 'veteran' of the organization, Luke. The resulting asymmetry of information and of power relating to the newcomers may be seen as an extension of that same logic: in order to maintain a pleasant atmosphere, try to avoid antagonism.

The second issue had to do with the cutting of one of the garden's trees. In a meeting of the administrative council, Martina, one of the newcomers that had previous experience in gardening was mapping out what species the garden had, and found that some trees were too close to each other, in a way that was detrimental to their development, and therefore suggested to cut one of them down. Those present on that meeting did not oppose the proposition, so it was approved.

On the very next day, Beatrice, who was not at the meeting, saw the tree being cut, which she experienced as a traumatic event. She then asked people who were at the meeting about it and nobody said they supported it; nobody seemed to stand by it. She later found out that the group decided by voting; which had never been the way decisions were made, and even people who voted for it did not defend their decision.

It was shown that, in that meeting, there was little... There was not a real discussion about this walnut tree affair, that nobody, in the end, really assumed the decision, and that what happened was that quickly there was someone who said 'well, come on, we vote for or against, come on, the majority is for, we have shouted, we write on the record that it is dealt with, we have voted for it'. ('Beatrice,' December 2021).

Beatrice wrote a long e-mail about this, expressing her disappointment and anger, and it finally led to her decision to leave the administrative council, and not to come to any more meetings. An exceptional meeting took place, without Beatrice, about four days after the occurrence to debate the issue, and when they told me about this, many people recognized that there was a problem in the decision-making. In the meeting, "[Martina] felt really bad. She spoke again about the decision and everything that had happened at that moment. With tears in her eyes, she was really disturbed about this..." ('Arthur,' December 2021). A new agreement was then made that every change that is considered 'structural' to the garden must be first





debated on the administrative council, then made known, and only a month after put in place, as to avoid that this kind of situation happen again ('Martina,' December 2021). Here, we can see reason for the both positions that arose around the museum director's affair: when Beatrice was able to voice dissent, pursuing conflict and therefore breaking with the 'joyful' tone, she was able to have the administrative council reflect upon itself and adapt the decision-making processes. However, Beatrice's own quitting of the association is the realization of what the opposing position was trying to avoid, the situation in which the organization no longer produces joyful encounters, leading people to abandon it. In a way, it is as if what makes activities have a considerable degree of freedom, is also what constrains them from going beyond 'feeling good,' as 'John' put it (January, 2022):

It is, maybe, that the stakes of the garden are not so high, you see. The stakes are to come to the garden, then water [the plants], make things grow. If that goes wrong, then it is just... There will be no tomatoes; it is not the end of the world either.

Encounters must remain joyful, at the expense of being so in the passive way, prompting desire for sameness and authority, for if they become sad, there is a serious risk of them not happening again at all.

## **5. DISCUSSION AND FINAL CONSIDERATIONS**

The resulting three themes have exposed that, firstly, Slope Garden is an organization where the verdict of the flesh is at the center of its activities. That leads to valuing the activities in themselves, in detriment for an exterior finality, such as increasing of productivity. Secondly, that there are some organizational protocols put in place that try to balance the erratic nature of the flesh's agency with the continuity of the organization. Those seek to make the entrance of newcomers easy, and in the facilitation of their entrance produces the rise of a few personalities who informally become central members. Finally, the last theme exposed that the emphasis of joyful encounters leads to avoidance of conflict and therefore to limitations to debate and democratic checks of organizational functioning.

Common activities in the garden put the agency of flesh in the center. The garden exists to expose the body to the sensations that arise from working on the land, of planting, trimming, building pathways and being in an environment that is very contrasting to the urban surroundings. Such activities require that people be at ease to use the tools that are available, and to know that they have the freedom to mess around the environment of the garden. Only that way they can put forward the activities they wish to in a manner that exposes them to encounters that are otherwise absent in urban life: with the soil, with hand tools, with plants,



and all their resistances to people's manipulation, with all their smells and the reactions they prompt in the human body. To work the land makes one tired, may hurt one's back, it takes time to be at ease, to experiment, and finally to be able to find joy in these encounters in a way that it may 'appease' someone, to help then 'evade themselves,' as has been said – it takes time to be able to have active joyful encounters arise.

That is what the welcoming protocol allows people to do. It allows different bodies to be put in relation to the surroundings of the garden, so that they can pursue actively the activities they are drawn to. And so, that the welcoming protocol be a passive form of joyful encounter makes perfect sense: what allows people to effectively pursue different activities in the garden is something that should be repeated several times. All the time, the same experience of being welcomed and led to what makes joy arise. This dynamic spawns different projects that are somewhat independent among themselves. People building wooden structures for insects or where plants can support themselves to grow does not interfere with people creating a pond, for example. This being so, a welcoming protocol seems like a nice way to articulate the ensemble of the garden, but it happens that active joyful encounters create difference within the projects while at the level of the organization's totality it is the sameness of the joyful encounters that gives the tone. Although the verdict of the flesh could be observed to impact organizing in a horizontalizing way in the case of the composition of the aromatic bouquet, it was so concerning something very small, practically unrelated to the overall organizing dynamics between projects. This organizational form works to make the organization persist in a rather decent way – no one can be said to be exploiting anyone else. However, it also serves as a sort of ritualized 'organizational propaganda' that fosters authority: the garden's protocol also circulates and normalizes the idea that any organizing needs centralizing, authoritative figures which provide meaning and direction, those few that welcome everyone else.

Somehow, members perceive conflict to be detrimental to the garden's functioning. Arthur tried to avoid the debate about the issue of the museum. After, when it happened, people supported the path that did not involve conflict. On the side of the experienced organizational members, most of them intuitively sought to maintain experiences around the garden pleasant. On the side of new members, it made sense simply to follow those that had gathered them there in the first place, instead of putting forward another stance. The limited conditions for debate in council meetings make of them simply validation meetings, where people are uncomfortable with opposing views and conflicts for they require a break with the dynamics of joyful encounters. It is also noteworthy that conflict finally took place when it was not against an



experienced member. Here, it could be said that “joyful encounters do not simply lead to the sharing of more joy, but also become part of an affective contagion eliciting conformity and entrainment.” (Sampson, 2016, p. 56).

It is also noteworthy that pluralism demands a level of need for the organization that seemed to be above that observed in Slope Garden. The role of the organization in people's lives did prompt engagement, but more so as long as that engagement resulted in nice interactions and more or less straightforward coordination among people. If that meant debating, opposing views, and further pursuing conflict in order to have the organization go a specific way, people would rather not have the activities happen altogether. The majority seemed to prefer sooner give up transparent debate and democratic practices, and the corresponding procedures that come along with it than to give up pleasant experiences. The present research found that the verdict of the flesh can be encouraged in an organization, and that an organizing protocol was put in place to let it flourish. However, that meant giving great importance to passive joyful encounters at the organizational level, in order to activities to foster active joyful encounters. Consequently, and however unintentional, that led to the rise of centralizing, authoritative figures, and difficulties for the occurrence of pluralistic debate.

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