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Book Review: Ariane Berthoin Antal, Michael Hutter & David Stark (Editors) Moments of Valuation: Exploring Sites of Dissonance

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***Moments of valuation: Exploring sites of dissonance*, by A. Berthoin Antal, M. Hutter, & D. Stark (Eds.), Oxford University Press, 2015**

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As questions of materiality, aesthetics, and multimodality gain traction in organizational scholarship, it is increasingly evident that multiple literatures are converging from diverse fields into a complex dialogue around organizing materiality. What materiality is, how it relates to the “physical” or the “symbolic”, and how it should be methodologically approached are all unresolved questions in organization studies, and justify the importance of the current special issue on Materiality and Visuality. The very appearance of these two terms together – Materiality and Visuality - attests to the ongoing boundary work in establishing new fields, and re-composing the basic categories of our social and phenomenal worlds to enable new ways of theorizing (e.g., Is the material an aesthetic modality, like the visual? If so, are hearing or smell included?). Ariane Berthoin Antal, Michael Hutter and David Stark’s edited volume is useful in two regards here: First, its chapters include fascinating examples of the diverse sensory practices, material objects, and measuring devices through which our social, political and economic worlds are structured. Second, it helps us reflexively understand the current theoretical moment as itself a contest to determine what counts as what, what will be constituted as material, and what potential solidities will melt into the air. By thinking of the material turn as a moment of institutional, and not just methodological, choice, we are attuned to the forces shaping our academic lives.

The opening chapter by Michael Hutter and David Stark lays out the conceptual stakes of studying valuation from a pragmatist approach, and very helpfully organizes the diverse chapters that follow according to that overarching goal. Beginning with the observation that societies of rapid innovation face problems of reaching valuation, they argue that valuation is achieved through trajectories of tasting, testing, and discursive contestation. Drawing on a pragmatist perspective

based on Dewey, they argue that valuation involves not only experience but also activity and performance, for instance, the activity of art critics, policy makers, and measurement “experts”. Neither driven by pure experience nor determined by macro structure, their “methodological situationist” approach spatially and temporally situates moments of valuation, making materiality relevant without falling into a material determinism.

The first part of the book, entitled “Varieties of Aesthetic Valuation”, focuses on the sensory aspects of valuation, where aesthetic experience and artistic creation support social processes that structure market trends, product innovation and legal and political understandings. Trevor Pinch’s chapter explores the increasing aesthetic acceptability of electronic sounds and how sound innovation struggled with normalization and market cooptation. Also focusing on new ways of sensing, Antoine Hennion focuses on practices of wine tasting in navigating the materiality and sociality of wine evaluation. Both chapters recognize that aesthetic appreciation is related to social structures that classify, divide and hierarchically order groups and practices. Yet neither is content to reduce aesthetic experience to these structuration effects; “materiality matters”, as Hennion affirms, and the aesthetic, although deeply political, cannot be reduced to an epiphenomenon of politics. Moving more explicitly into the structuration effects of art, Michael Hutter examines how artistic influences become sources of innovation (and, might I suggest – appropriation?) for the cultural industries. John Brewer’s chapter examines how the struggle for how to define “a chunk of European heritage” (p. 92) plays out in courtroom cases where expertise is contested by technology. Finally, Svetlana Kharchenkova and Olav Velthuis examine how differences in interpreting contemporary Chinese art resonated with heterogeneous audiences in the internationalization of cultural products. In each of these chapters, which move beyond the “immediacy” of taste and sound, important financial, legal and political outcomes turn on how actors receive artistic production, and such receptions are inevitably sites of contestation.

Part 2 of the book, titled “Devices valorizing uncertain aesthetic experiences”, tracks the ways that attention gets directed to certain products through criticism or structured experience.

Phillipa Chong's chapter on book reviews (which I read with great interest, given my current task of reviewing this book) examines the complex role-switching and reciprocity issues when writers review each other's work. Balancing between aesthetic disinterestedness and the material and professional consequences of their judgments, writers must decide when to sweeten their words or sharpen their wit, as they vie for attention with their objects of valuation. Sophie Mutzel's textual analysis of Berlin restaurant reviews, perhaps the most "macro" survey of the book, uses networks of common terms to evidence the emergence of new tastes around a "New German" style. Finally, Anne-Sophie's Trebuchet-Breitwiler's chapter on luxury perfumes describes how devices are used to establish an aesthetically curated relationship with customers, enabling a complex and disinterested act of smelling, that ultimately approaches the climactic moment of "on skin" experience. In these chapters, value uncertainty is negotiated through peer review, practices of writing, and structured experience, not always to "make sense" of an experience, but sometimes to allow it to persist in its ambiguity. As we saw in the previous section, a key lesson is reiterated that maintaining this ambiguity is an important social outcome in its own right. A lesson to be taken to heart by organizational theorists overly occupied with framing, categorizing, or sensemaking.

In part 3 of the Book, entitled "Valuation in Fields of Practice", we move largely away from the cultural industries and their emphasis on immediate experience, into professional worlds of valuation. Claude Rosental's chapter on artificial intelligence describes how notions of "fuzzy logic" became imbued with cultural attributions (Americans don't like fuzzy things whereas Japanese don't mind). Moving from computing to accounting fields, Andrea Mennicken and Michael Power's chapter examines how "fair value" concepts opened new imaginaries for corporate valuation that supported contemporary financial capitalism. By shifting valuation from current value to imagined future exchange value, hypothetical world-creation became a corporate *modus operandi*, demonstrating how "plasticity of value" makes the economic valuation of companies a largely fictitious enterprise. Liliana Doganova and Peter Karnøe's chapter on valuation in environmental entrepreneurship compares environmental to economic bases for valuation, and explores how differing approaches to

combining the two are at the heart of environmental entrepreneurship. Finally, Holger Strassheim, Arlena Jung and Rebecca-Lea Korinek examine the differential use of behavioral economic “nudges” in the U.K. and Germany, arguing that distinct cultures of expert valuation in the two countries explain why the British have been active in establishing liberal-paternalistic “nudge units” while the Germans have been slower to respond. This section, pitched at the more “macro” level of institutional and professional fields, is likely to whet the interest of many organizational scholars of the institutional variety, who may find in its pages new ways of adjusting their theories to understand contests, field-configuration, and institutional change.

The fourth and final section of the book, entitled “Valuation within Organizations”, focuses back into the walls of specific organizations, to understand how managers, employees and professional colleagues perform valuation in their work settings. Ignacio Farias’ examination of “epistemic dissonance” contrasts the already-known “evaluative dissonance” (where standards of evaluation are heterogeneous) and situations in which dissonance results from differences in the kinds of knowledge held by actors. In the context of architecture, because of the heterogeneous actors involved and their different knowledge of the situation, solutions often must be remade and former impossibilities become later possibilities. Ariane Berthoin Antal’s chapter on artistic interventions examines the role of artistic groups that enter organizations and unsettle business-as-usual by creating “interspaces” where new ways of operating can be imagined. Finally, Kimberly Chong’s chapter examines how a Chinese management consulting organization teaches new entrants to focus their consulting on creating shareholder value and improving the balance sheet, as opposed to other potential sources of values such as customer relationships.

Taken together, these chapters provide a broad and multi-level overview of valuations as an analytical lens. Reading through the chapters, I was tempted to reframe many current academic issues as problems of valuation; creativity and innovation, institutional work and contradictory logics, identity and role dynamics, sensemaking and storytelling approaches could all benefit from thinking in terms of valuation activities and devices. The centrality of materials, aesthetics, and practices in

performing valuation further suggest a theoretical synergy; indeed, valuation might provide an interesting hook for materiality scholars to hang their hat on. What are the stakes of such a choice, and what would be gained and lost in the process?

A remarkable feature of the book is the persistent coexistence of, on the one hand, the vast array of techniques described to establish aesthetic and material bases for valuation, and on the other hand, the centrality of the principle of dissonance, that newness comes not from the success of these techniques, but from their perpetual incompleteness. I felt the specter of dissonance always in the background during my reading. Yet much of the action in the empirics came in the attempt to establish a given sensory regime so as to consolidate value. If most of the book dealt with the order-giving resolution of valuation, its energy came from the foundational role of dissonance in this process. To use an analogy from Barthes' visual theory, if valuation was the volume's *studium*, its topic of interest, then dissonance was its *punctum*, the persistent open wound or imperfection that undermines the totality of the *studium*. It was as if at each moment of valuation, the focus on practice and performance was accompanied by a "yes, but"; as if the materiality of this approach, rather than grounding it and consolidating it, unhinged the material itself from a safe mooring. The affirmation that "materiality matters" gave little consolation. Left without an ontological escape hatch, I found the immediacy of my own bodily sensations to be the site of the most intense political battles.

Perhaps this is for the better; no one these days wants to be a mind-body dualist, especially in an age of genetically modified organisms, corporate yoga training, and cyborgs. Yet if valuation is to be understood as a space of material contestation and dissonance, then there are some "moments" I think might have been useful in this discussion. If "sites of dissonance" include wine tasting events, then they surely also include refugee check points. While I am excited to read about the devices used to purify a tuberose essence in haute perfumery, I would have liked also to understand the valuation of air quality in Delhi, and the devices used to determine how dangerous toxins are distributed across social classes. While the analysis of "nudge units" gives a fascinating

insight into the political culture of behavioral prediction, I would like to see how such nudges are also used to promote payday loans and sub-prime mortgages. One way to really convince readers that “materiality matters” is to show how those left out of valuation contests are subject to material violence, are seen but not heard, are disappeared or made invisible. Nothing in the volume seems inconsistent with such explorations; a rich research agenda around materiality would include both moments of rarified aesthetic delight and the moments when materiality is a burden to bear. Ultimately the fact that both moments co-exist in human worlds may be the greatest dissonance of all.