

Nadine Arnold, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, [n.a.arnold@vu.nl](mailto:n.a.arnold@vu.nl)  
Christian Bessy, IDHES ENS Paris-Saclay, [christian.bessy@idhe.ens-cachan.fr](mailto:christian.bessy@idhe.ens-cachan.fr)

## Questioning perception in (organized) valuation

*Workshop report written by Nadine Arnold and Christian Bessy*



*Figure 1 The group of sociologists who explored the role of perception in organized valuation processes in Hamburg on October 24th and 25th. Back row, left to right: Ronny Ehlen, Thorsten Peetz, Christian Bessy, Désirée Waibel, Sarah Lenz, Konstantin Hondros, Christopher Dorn. Front row, left to right: Marco Hohmann, Frank Meier, Nadine Arnold.*

At the end of October 2024, the working group on Organization and Valuation from the Sociology of Organizations section of the German Sociological Association convened to explore the role of perception in valuation at the Centre “Futures of Sustainability” of the Universität Hamburg. For this endeavor, the working group invited Christian Bessy from IDHES ENS Paris-Saclay, to discuss his conceptualization of “prise” referred to as the “sense of things,” as elaborated together with Francis Chateauraynaud in their well-received book ‘Experts et Faussaires’ (1995, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 2014)).

*Christian Bessy* (ENS Paris-Saclay) kicked off the workshop by presenting how the sense of things unfolds when abstract evaluation templates that are socially accepted (referred to as landmarks) align with sensory apprehension, which is not pre-given and occurs situationally (referred to as folds). While,

he explained how this conceptualization developed in relation to two widely recognized theoretical currents: Actor Network Theory (ANT) and Convention Theory, the most relevant claim for the workshop was that it is not only metrics, standards, and other formalized elements from the organizational domain (i.e., landmarks) that guide valuations; full engagement of the sensory faculties (perception) also plays a crucial role in valuation processes, particularly in identifying, maintaining and authenticating objects. During his introductory lecture, Bessy emphasized that the link between these two levels (perceptions and qualifications) is based on conventions of trans-identification of things in different contexts. These conventions presuppose a collective learning of description languages and collections. He also highlighted the fact that paying attention to things makes it possible to link aesthetic and environmental aspects.

Two contributions directly engaged with the differentiation between the formally organized aspects of valuation (i.e., landmarks) and the more perceptive aspects (i.e., folds, traces and signs), in which situated body-to-body interactions matter. In this regard, *Désirée Waibel* (Universität Luzern) raised the question of whether valuation can be distinguished into the abstract and the concrete, hypothesizing that amateurs, rather than experts, are ascribed to the realm of the concrete, where valuation relies heavily on perception and senses. *Christopher Dorn* (Universität Bielefeld) also addressed the contrast between organized and perceived valuation, elaborating on a causal chain that begins with the rationalized evaluations of hospitals through rankings. He noted that patients attending poorly ranked hospitals may face stigma, which can lead to shame and stress, presenting a case of abstract valuations that may have bodily consequences.

Building on compelling empirical cases, another group of workshop contributors highlighted the centrality of sensory perception in assessing value(s) and authenticity. *Thorsten Peetz* (Universität Bamberg) and *Frank Meier* (Universität Bremen) captivated the audience with their analysis of Therese Neumann, known as Resl von Konnersreuth (1898-1962), who was famous for her reported stigmata and extreme fasting. Therese Neumann sparked public fascination and pilgrimage due to her bleeding wounds resembling those of Christ. While the dominant discourse has focused on the controversial debate regarding the authenticity of Therese Neumanns' stigmata, Peetz and Meier used her case to argue that bodily changes and perceptions serve as valid means for valuation, especially for laypeople, going beyond the conventional level.

*Konstantin Hondros* (HSU Hamburg) expanded the discussion on perception in valuation processes by illustrating how senses are utilized to evaluate art and student papers generated by AI. He argued that AI can evoke a range of emotions, from appreciation to rejection and fear, calling for a better understanding of the role of perception in the valuation and appreciation of AI and the authenticity of the things it generates. An empirical case where individual senses play a recognized role in valuation

conventions was presented by *Marco Hohmann* (Universität Hamburg). Reporting from his multi-site ethnography of upcycling startups in the textile sector, he demonstrated how perception is pivotal in transforming wasted textiles into desirable products. These startups selectively choose materials for upcycling, consciously avoiding scaling, in contrast to conventional mainstream textile businesses that prioritize large volumes and low prices.

Two further contributions focused on food valuation, where sensory experience might intuitively seem paramount. While this is particularly true for individual food consumption, *Nadine Arnold* (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam) and *Allison Loconto* (Université Gustave Eiffel) illuminated that the international trade of food produced in the Global South is structured in a highly standardized way that enables cheap food and sidelines perception. Interestingly, this logic also applies to newer standards that invoke social and ecological values. *Ronny Ehlen* (Universität Hohenheim) echoed this observation by emphasizing the omnipresence of quality standards in food commerce, making the relevant argument that in everyday supermarket contexts, abstract standards are subject to interpretation. In these spaces of interpretation, one can expect that shopfloor workers' individual sensory experiences will matter, even though the quality standards are intended to mask or suppress them.

Overall, the workshop provided a rich exploration of the intricate ways perception conditions and shapes valuation across various domains, encouraging participants of this workshop to consider and rethink the theoretical and empirical implications of the body and sensory experiences in valuation processes that appear stable and rationalized. Particularly, when valuation comes to unique items such as works of art, local produce, discarded and composite objects (upcycling) or the evocation of sanctity.

Relevant literature and links:

- The workshop was mainly building on this book: Bessy, Christian, & Chateauraynaud, Francis (2014). *Experts et faussaires : pour une sociologie de la perception* (2e éd. Augmented by a postscript translated in English, *Being attentive to things: Pragmatic approaches to authenticity*). Paris: Pétra. The English postscript can be downloaded [here](#).
- The workshop program can be found [here](#) and more information about the working group on Organization and Valuation from the Sociology of Organizations section of the German Sociological Association [here](#).