

PhD projects

Paranoid economy: A valuation studies approach to the contemporary visual art scene of Buenos Aires, Argentina

Renato Mauricio Fumero

Universidad Nacional de San Martín –
Instituto de Altos Estudios Sociales;
Universidad Nacional de las Artes –
Instituto de Investigación y experimentación en Arte y Crítica
renatomfumero@gmail.com

Art critics, historians, and sociologists agree that the Argentinian visual art scene, especially that of Buenos Aires, has undergone fundamental changes during the last two decades as a result of educational, institutional, market, and generational renewal. It has been said, either with optimism, pessimism or skepticism, that these changes have already (or will eventually) helped to develop the Argentinian art scene to the standard of international contemporary art.

The central dichotomy in the debates around this period of time is one of *professionalized* against *unprofessionalized*, which has both heuristical and normative connotations. This – sometimes imprecise,

sometimes contradictory – pair of concepts, on the one hand, supposedly define two contradictory socialization models that recall the traditional sociological opposition between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*. On the other hand, the opposition is used to consider the relation between economic and aesthetic value, specifically the autonomy or heteronomy of the later.

This research project aims to examine valuation in the contemporary visual art scene of Buenos Aires. I chose three relevant institutions as case studies, each of which have specific evaluation and valuation profiles that will allow me to explore classical lines of discussion about value and art.

To summarize my research: (a) Artistic competitions have traditionally been seen as devices that set the aesthetic value of an artwork and, therefore, assign social hierarchies to artists (and their reputations) within the art field. (b) The art market, on the other hand, was traditionally considered to be the device that assigned economic value and hierarchized positions in relation to the social system. The classic opposition, absolutely central to modern art, between autonomy and heteronomy can be problematized when analyzing the distinction between these two forms of value. (c) The pension bill projects presented by artists' associations in the National Congress will allow me to explore the inherent problems of art as labor and artists as workers.

Three core ideas are fundamental to my research. First, valuation is a social practice (Helgesson and Muniesa 2013). Second, valuation implies evaluating and valorizing (Vatin 2013). Finally, the kind of approach to valuation in the art scene that I am advocating should be concerned with the relationship between economization (Caliskan and Callon 2009) and artification (Shapiro and Heinich 2012).

The scope of my work is not only driven by attention to the inner processes (practices, devices, discourses, etc.) that define each of these institutions, but, taken as “moments of valuation” (Antal, Hutter, and Stark 2015), is also concerned with the significant connections that exist between them; i.e., the specific “translations” that link and produce the relation between art galleries, artistic competitions, and pension systems for artists.

This research makes three main contributions:

First, orientated on “methodological situationism” (Stark 2009), it produces what is in local sociology an unprecedentedly dense empirical study of some of the institutions on the local contemporary visual arts scene.

Second, it provides a theoretical analysis of the said institutions, fundamentally grounded in the recent valuation studies tradition.

Finally, I propose an original model to approach the problem of entangled or folded valuations (Helgesson 2016) that, as recently done by Hutter (2016), frames them as communication phenomena. I study valuation entanglements as sequential, unbalanced, and dynamic systems of (in)communication.

References

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Taking care of your financial health

Viviane Fernandes

Federal University of Rio de Janeiro / Museu Nacional, Brazil
vivianemf@gmail.com

My research encompasses the role of public institutions and private agents in attempting to intervene in the ways individuals and families manage their own finances. It presents a set of Brazilian initiatives on policies and programs of financial education. Based on ethnographic observation, I follow the work of a number of experts who articulate, produce, and disseminate ideas and techniques with regard to personal finance in order to teach individuals how to use their money "more suitably". I focus on understanding the activities of these professionals, who seek to influence consumption behavior, saving, and investment practices by encouraging individuals to recognize "behavioral biases" and "financial mistakes".

During my four years of fieldwork, I was able to follow a

range of initiatives that brought me to many different places – meeting rooms in universities, government offices, schools, training venues, convention centers, sports centers, churches, corporate headquarters, etc., – where I met and talked with a large number of experts from diverse backgrounds. All of the experts used different methodologies but with the same aim: the promotion and expansion of people's financial knowledge.

Since my interlocutors always tell me about the importance of being attentive to "financial health" or having a "healthy financial life", I organized the research to take into consideration this use of metaphorical medical language for the diagnosis, treatment, and prevention of financial problems. The thesis, therefore, has three axes:

a) The first focuses on the "ways of diagnosing": the creation of the problem together with the rise of awareness that there is a lack of financial education. I describe the work of a group of agents and agencies (on a national and international scale) responsible for the conception of financial education as a public policy as well as its implementation and measurement.

b) The second is related to the "treatment" procedures, i.e., how to cope with financial problems. Here I am interested in debts since they are considered to be one of the main consequences of the inability to manage financial resources. Observing the practices of a state institution in Rio de Janeiro – The Consumer Protection Committee (Nudecon) – I focus on activities carried out by the state to assist those who seek legal help in solving problems and conflicts with financial institutions.

c) Finally, I present the "work of prevention" against "financial lack of control". Inspired by the anthropology of economy and the anthropology of public policies, I follow the work of educators who

disseminate techniques regarding money management and hence I can go further in considering (i) notions of control; (ii) constructions of what would constitute a "safe future" and "a planned life"; (iii) concepts of "financial well-being"; (iii) methodologies and calculations that would allow for the planning of important life events (such as marriage, retirement, the birth of children, etc.).

In dialogue with governmentality studies, I aim to demonstrate that this work of intervention in people's "financial lives" is not restricted to teaching them techniques to manage their finances. In addition, it encompasses an attempt to act on their behaviors and feelings about the future. Through financial education initiatives, experts aim to encourage individuals to be aware of what the future holds, making them reflect on their own behavior and their use of money in the present to manage risks and therefore avoid financial problems in the future.