On the Economy of Symbolic Goods

Ethnographical Explorations at the Art Basel

Franz Schultheis / Thomas Mazzurana

University of St.Gallen

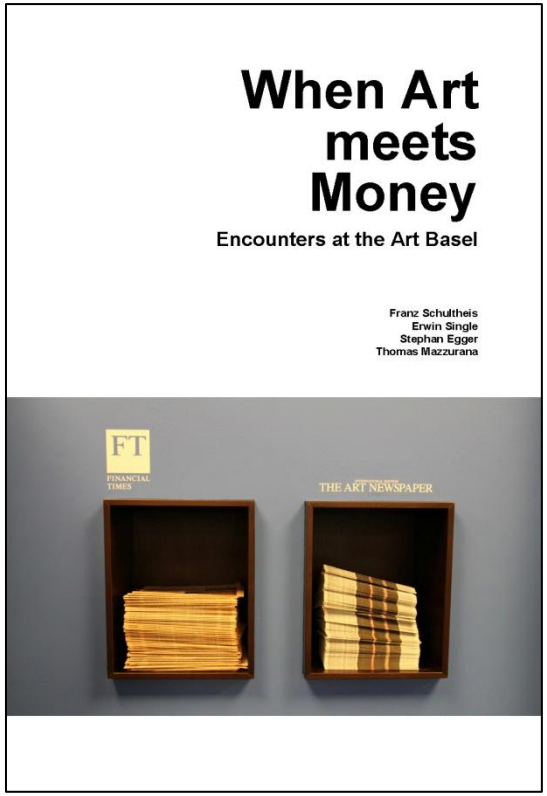
Art & Market: Alienation or Emancipation? / 17–18 November 2016, St.Gallen

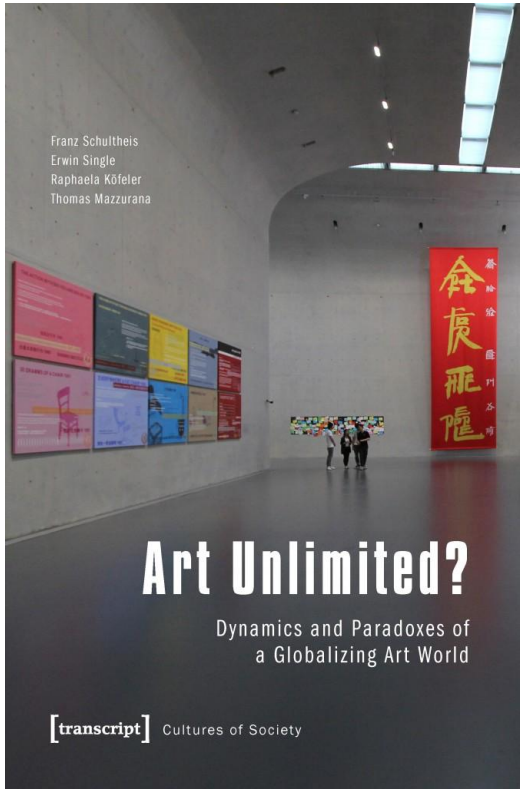


Ethnographical Explorations at the Art Basel

Books







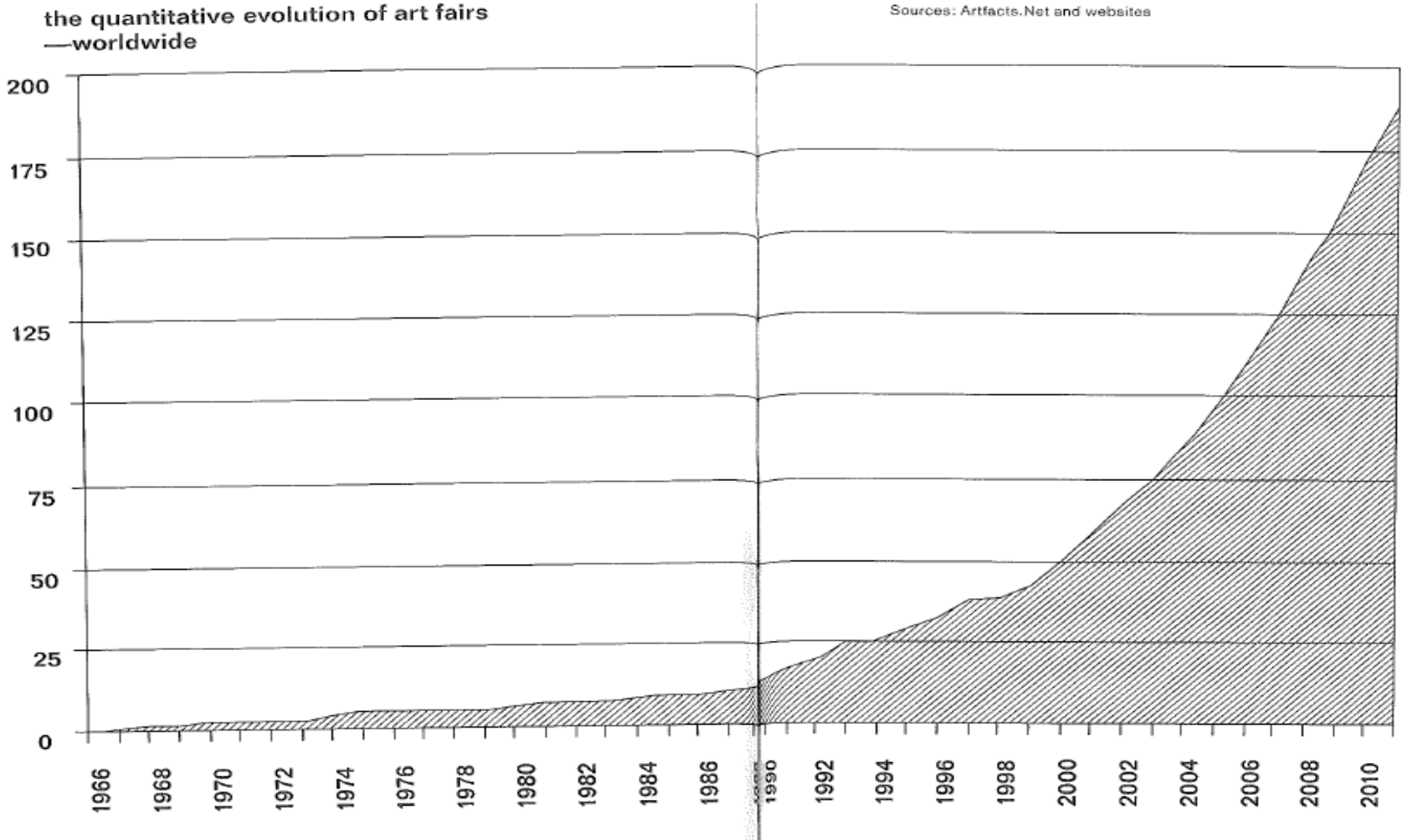
Agenda

University of St.Gallen

- Ethnographical Explorations at the Art Basel
- On the Economy of Symbolic Goods
- A social-topography of the Art Basel
- Results from the Interviews
- A globalizing art world

Ethnographical Explorations at the Art Basel

The decade of the art fairs: suitable places for a sociological analysis



Ethnographical Explorations at the Art Basel

The “mother of all art fairs”: how Art Basel presents itself

“The world's premier international art show for modern and contemporary works, Art Basel features nearly 300 leading galleries from North America, Latin America, Europe, Asia and Africa. More than 2'500 artists, ranging from the great masters of Modern art to the latest generation of emerging stars, are represented in the show's multiple sections. The exhibition includes the highest-quality paintings, sculptures, drawings, installations, photographs, video and editioned works.”

Art | Basel

Ethnographical Explorations at the Art Basel

The art market: from economic to sociological perspectives

The art market has developed in the last twenty years not only to a privileged field for investment and speculation which, significantly, has boomed precisely in times of world-wide economic and financial crisis. It also provides in many respects an interesting terrain for the treatment of fundamental social scientific issues. These include, among others, questions on the specifics of markets for cultural and symbolic goods, on the transfer processes from economic capital to immaterial capital and their ambivalent effects, and also on the functions that these symbolic goods can fulfil for economic enterprises and their actors (public stylization of an image, creation of legitimacy and trust by showing a love of art, etc.).

Ethnographical Explorations at the Art Basel

Macro-, meso- and micro-perspectives

The macro-economic and macro-sociological perspective on Art market provides interesting clues and stimuli for studying this field, but our research intends to climb down from the heights of the macroscopic top-down perspective to the level of concrete practice and outlook if it is to trace the “cultural significance” (Weber) and the social sense of what is happening in the art market in a meaningful way. It is necessary to undertake systematic empirical observation and analysis of the structures and patterns of action of the players in this “game” and their subjective meaning given to the practices under observation. To this end ethnographic field research can be of value in a very special way.

Ethnographical Explorations at the Art Basel

As the "Olympics of the art world" (New York Times) the Art Basel provides the unique opportunity to research the global art market in a concentrated way in terms of space and time with different qualitative and quantitative methods. The sociological seminar at the University of St. Gallen (HSG) has drafted two research projects supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNF) dealing more closely with the structure and change of the modern art world and its social and cultural functions and backgrounds.

Ethnographical Explorations at the Art Basel

Comparative look on intercultural convergences and divergences of „love of art“ and social attitudes and practices of „inhabitants“ of Art World

Art Basel in Basel 2012-2013

Art Basel in Miami Beach 2012-2013

Art Basel in Honkong 2013-2014

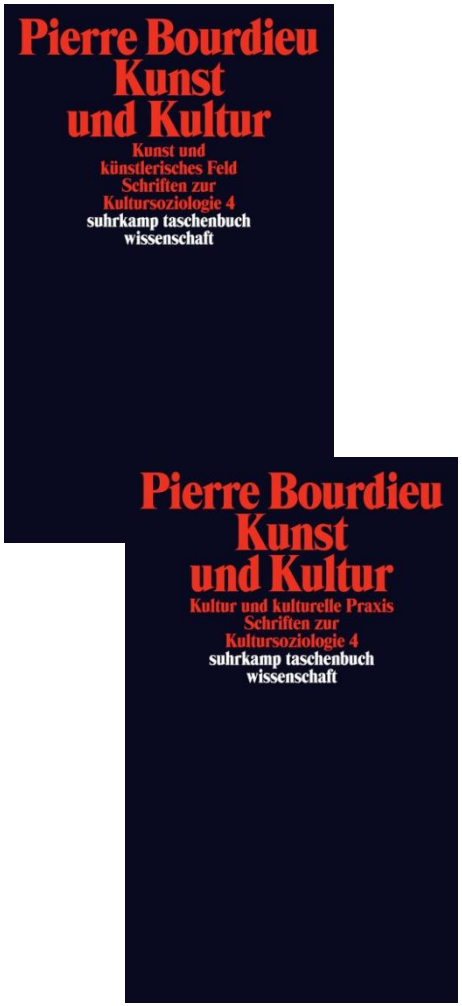
Ethnographical Explorations at the Art Basel

Research Methods and Strategies

1. In-depth interviews with 120 selected gallery owners, collectors, curators, art consultants and, last but not least, artists.
2. Online survey and paper-based survey in Basel, Miami Beach, Hong Kong: Visitor and Gallery Survey.
3. Socio-spatial analyses on the internal structure of Art Basel
4. Systematic participant observation of the various facets of this "event”
5. Photographic documentation of the observable social practices complete the research design of this ethnographic field study.
6. All these research methods and strategies were used systematically in our comparative approach of the three Art Basel-Worlds.

References to Bourdieus sociological work







Markets of symbolic goods

“The art market, which trades in objects which are not tradable, is one of those practices in which the logic of the pre-capitalist economy has survived in a similar fashion to the economy of exchange between generations in a different context. As they function as practical denials it is only possible when carrying them out to do what one does by acting as if one were not doing them.”
Pierre Bourdieu

The art market: sociological perspectives

Our research questions concerned the role of art fairs for the constitution of a global economic-cultural elite, the forms of social inclusion/exclusion (for ex. the definitions of VIP at Art Basel) and the (re-)production of social capital during the art fairs.

We were also interested in the “eventization” of the art fair and the branding-strategies of Art Basel in 3 different cultural areas.

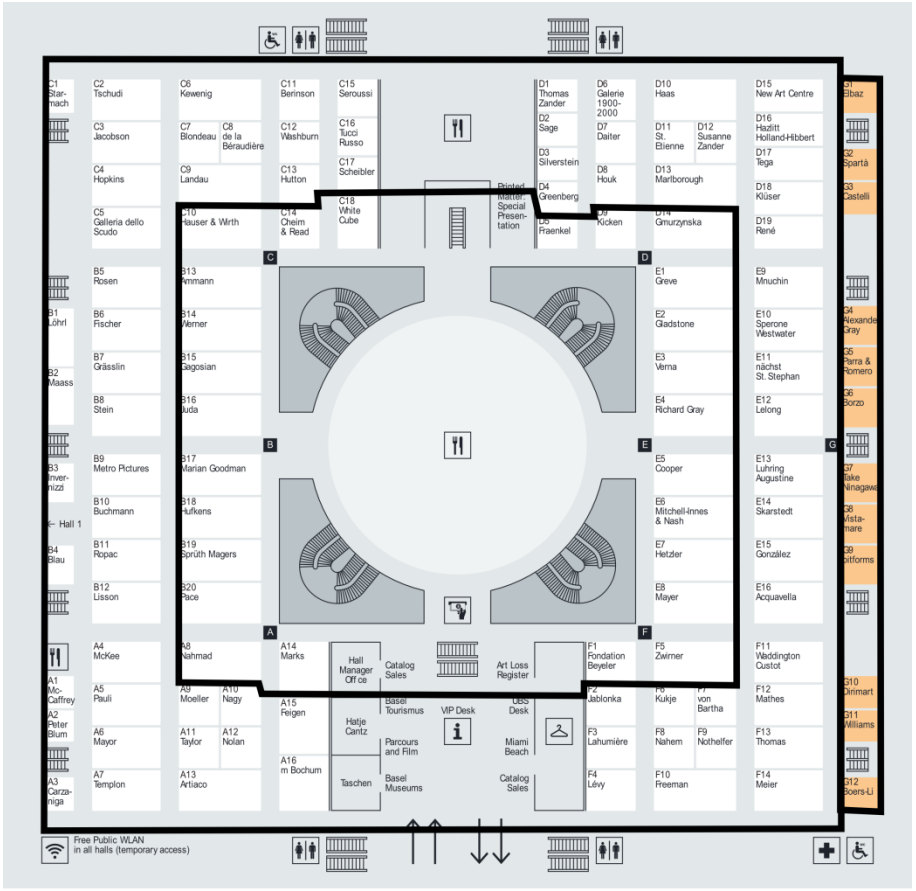
At the same time, sociology is asking questions concerning the cultural representations and social judgements of different types of art specialists interacting in the field of art (for ex. by dressing classifications of categories of art buyers)

Ethnography of Art Basel: research methods and strategies

„Who is who?“: Procedures and logics of social classifications in practice at Art Basel

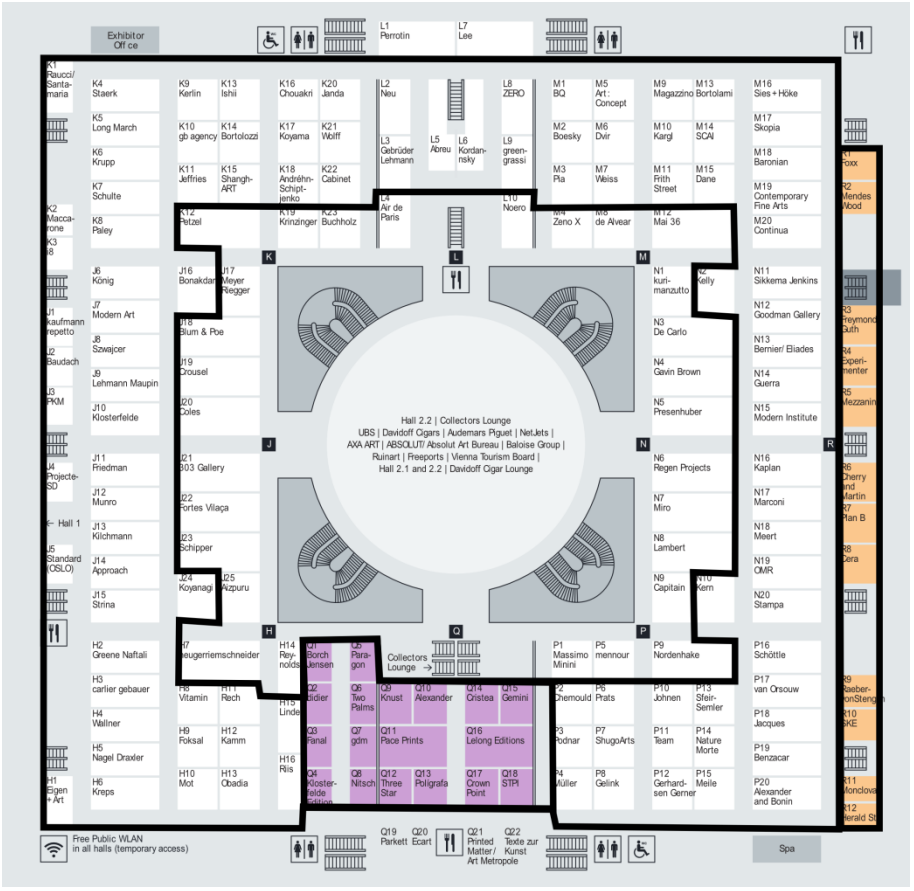
- Selection of 300 galleries from more than 1000 candidates by a jury of exerts
- Classification of „visitors“ in distinctive categories
- First choice
- Premium
- Special VIP
- Public

Social topography of Art Basel



Hall 2.0

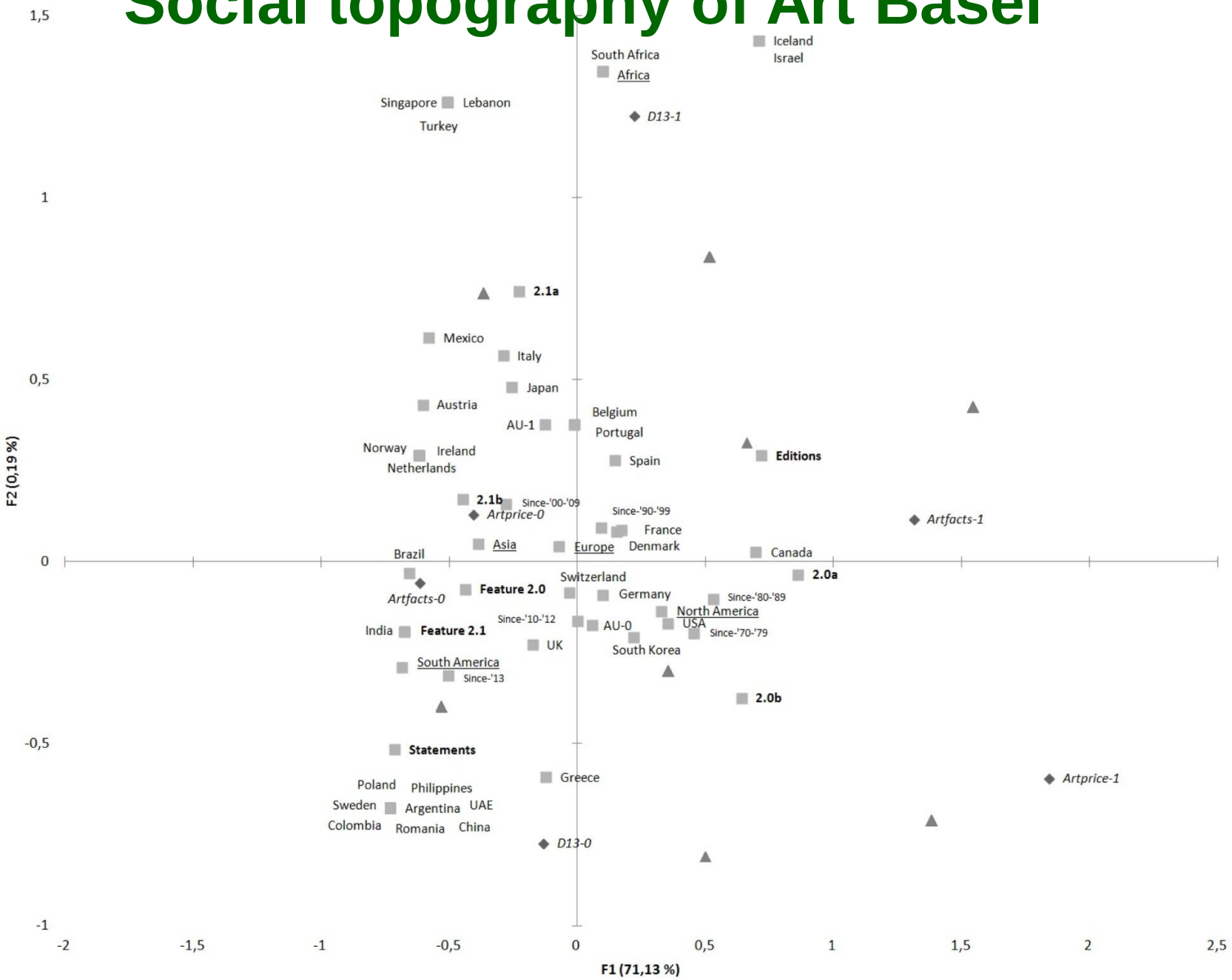
Periphery – Center – Periphery



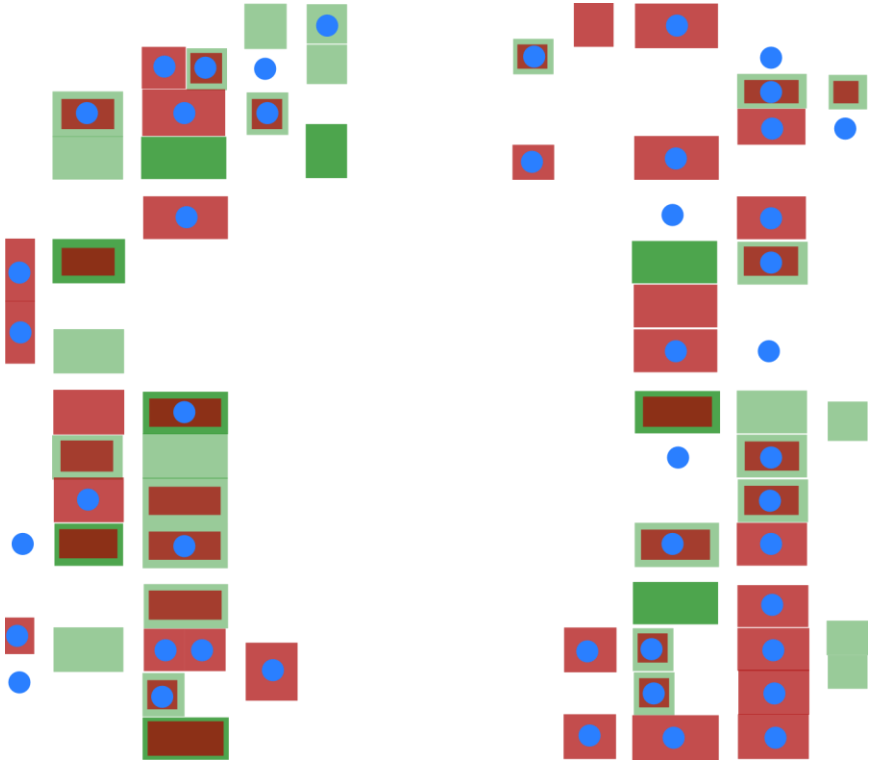
Hall 2.1

Periphery – Center – Periphery

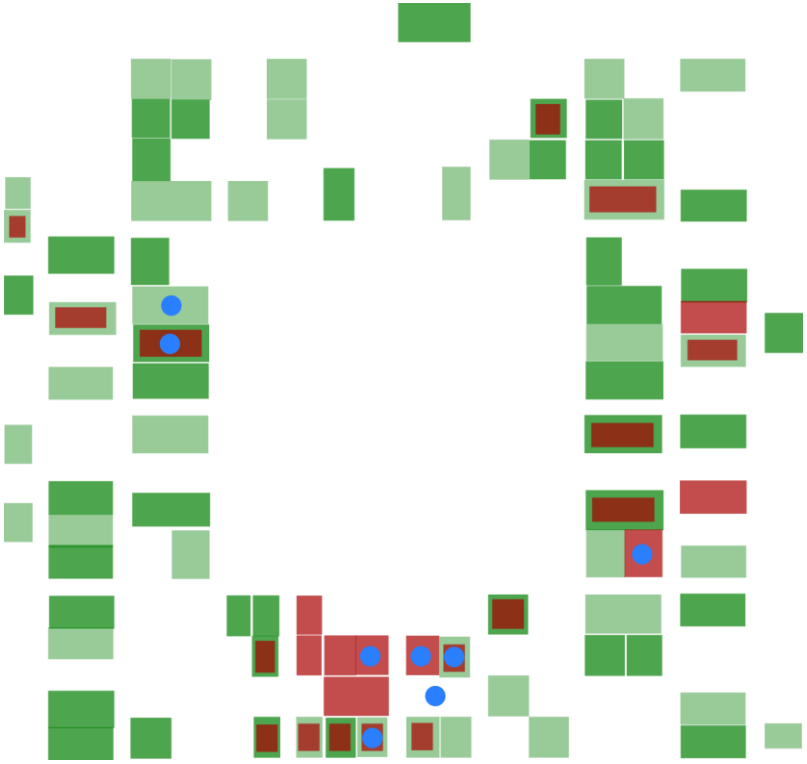
Social topography of Art Basel



Social topography of Art Basel



Hall 2.0



Hall 2.1

Blue: Galleries representing the twenty top-selling artists worldwide in 2012
Red: Galleries with artists who were among the twenty highest ranked artists in Artfacts in 2012
Green: Galleries offering artists who were represented at the Documenta 13 in Kassel

The visitors-survey

Art | Basel | Miami Beach
1-4 | Dec | 11

VISITOR'S SURVEY BY University of St.Gallen Fondation Bourdieu

A. Personal information

1) Your gender: female [ ] male [ ]

2) Your year of birth:

3) Your country of residence (please give official abbreviation, e.g. US, GB, BRA, RU, CN):

4) Your place of residence (e.g. Miami, New York, Mexico City, Moscow, Bejing):

5) Your highest educational level:
None [ ] Elementary School [ ] Vocational Training [ ] High School / College [ ] Polytechnic [ ] University [ ]

6) Your profession (please indicate as exactly as possible):

7) Are you or have you been active in the fine arts? yes [ ] no [ ]
7a) If yes, as: (multiple choice) artist [ ] gallerist [ ] collector [ ] curator [ ] art journalist [ ]
other, please name:

B. Your visit to Art Basel Miami Beach 2011

9) You are visiting Art Basel Miami Beach. Which days you have spent / you want to spend there? (multiple choice)
Wednesday [ ] Thursday [ ] Friday [ ] Saturday [ ] Sunday [ ]

2) How often have you already visited Art Basel Miami Beach?
Never [ ] once [ ] twice [ ] three times [ ] four times [ ] five times [ ] up to ten times [ ]

3) Do you / did you come:

alone	[ ]	with a guided group	[ ]
with your partner	[ ]	with experts in art	[ ]
with your family	[ ]	with clients	[ ]
with friends/acquaintances	[ ]	with business partners	[ ]

4) How do you / did you go through Art Basel Miami Beach?

Accompanied by competent acquaintances	[ ]	with the help of the App	[ ]
with the help of the catalogue	[ ]	without a guide	[ ]
with the help of the showguide	[ ]		

5) Did you plan in advance to visit certain sectors? yes [ ] no [ ]
5a) If yes, which sectors? (multiple choice)
Art Galleries [ ] Art Nova [ ] Art Positions [ ] Art Kabinett[ ] Art Video [ ] Art Public [ ] Art Magazines [ ]

6) Did you plan in advance to visit certain artists/works? Yes [ ] no [ ]
6a) If yes, which artists / works?

7) Did you make any discoveries at the Art Basel Miami Beach? Yes [ ] no [ ]
7a) If yes, which artists / works?

8) Did you buy any artwork at the Art Basel Miami Beach? Yes [ ] no [ ]

9) How would you assess your visit to Art Basel Miami Beach up to now?
Delighted [ ] satisfied [ ] disappointed [ ] frustrated [ ]

10) Do you consider the choice of the galleries of Art Basel Miami Beach representative of the global market for modern art?
Completely [ ] to some extent [ ] not really [ ] not at all [ ]

11) Do you consider the choice of galleries of Art Basel Miami Beach representative of the global market for contemporary art?
Completely [ ] to some extent [ ] not really [ ] not at all [ ]

12) Do you have the feeling that the trends in contemporary art reflected in the Art Basel Miami Beach are: (multiple choice)

in step with the times	[ ]	forward-looking	[ ]	conventional	[ ]
short-lived	[ ]	repetitive	[ ]	surprising	[ ]
critical-reflective	[ ]				
market conform-commercial	[ ]				

other, please name:

13) Did you / will you participate in one of the events of the supporting programme? Yes [ ] no [ ]
13a) If yes, in which events? (multiple choice)
Art Basel Conversations [ ] Art Salon [ ] Art Parcours [ ] Art Public Opening Night [ ] Art Video Nights [ ] Art Film [ ]

14) Did you visit other art fairs during your stay in Miami? Yes [ ] no [ ]
14a) If yes, which art fairs? (multiple choice)
Art Asia [ ] Art Miami [ ] Art Now Fair [ ] Design Miami [ ] NADA Art Fair [ ] Pulse [ ] Scope [ ] Verge Art Fair Miami [ ]
others, please name:

15) Did you visit art museums during your stay in Miami? Yes [ ] no [ ]
15a) If yes, which museums? (multiple choice)
Art Center [ ] Bass Museum [ ] Boca Raton [ ] De la Cruz Collection [ ] Frost Art Museum [ ] Margulies Collection [ ]
Miami Art Museum [ ] Miami Museum of Contemporary Art [ ] Norton Museum of Art [ ] Rubell Family Collection [ ]
others, please name:

16) Which aspects of Art Basel Miami Beach are most important for you? (multiple choice)

overview of developments in the history of art	[ ]	enjoying the special atmosphere	[ ]
overview of current developments in art	[ ]	following interesting debates	[ ]
participating in an important cultural event	[ ]	making/renewing contacts	[ ]
discovering new artists	[ ]	looking for interesting purchases	[ ]

other, please name:

C. Your preferences in the visual arts

1) Do you have visited one of the following art fairs in the past, please indicate: (multiple choice)

Abu Dhabi Art Fair	[ ]	Art Chicago	[ ]	FIAC Paris	[ ]
ARCO Madrid	[ ]	Art Cologne	[ ]	Frieze Art Fair London	[ ]
Armory Show New York	[ ]	Art Forum Berlin	[ ]	Maco México Contemporaneo	[ ]
Art Basel	[ ]	Art Hong Kong	[ ]	Shanghai Contemporary Art Fair	[ ]

others, please name:

2) Do you have visited one of the following biennals in the past, please indicate: (multiple choice)

Berlin Biennal	[ ]	documenta Kassel	[ ]	Instanbul Biennal	[ ]
Bienal de São Paulo	[ ]	Gwangju Biennal	[ ]	Manifesta	[ ]
Venice Biennale	[ ]				
Whitney Biennal New York	[ ]				

others, please name:

3) Which were the last art museums you visited? (please give precise name, place)

4) Which were the last galleries you visited? (please give precise name, place, eventually artist)

5) In which kind of art you are interested? (multiple choice)
pre-modern art [ ] modern art [ ] post war and contemporary art [ ]

6) Which are your preferred artists in pre-modern art? (please name)

7) Which are your preferred artists in modern art? (please name)

8) Which are your preferred artists in post war and contemporary art? (please name)

9) Do you regularly read art journals or culture journals with reference to art? yes [ ] no [ ]
9a) If yes, which ones? (please name)

10) Do you inform yourself about current developments on the art markets? yes [ ] no [ ]
10a) If yes, where? (multiple choice)
specialized magazines [ ] art market sections of the international daily newspapers [ ] business magazines [ ]
internet websites [ ] newsletters of galleries, art dealers, auction houses [ ]
others, please name:

11) Do you buy any original works of art? yes [ ] no [ ]
11a) If yes: For yourself or as a part of your job? for myself [ ] as a part of my job [ ] both [ ]
11b) If yes: (multiple choice) systematically [ ] spontaneously [ ] repeatedly [ ] sporadically [ ]
11c) If yes: From whom or where do you buy art? (multiple choice)
from galleries [ ] from art fairs [ ] from auction houses [ ] directly from the artists [ ]
from other persons / institutions, please name:

12) How would you personally assess an offer of virtual art fairs in the net?
very interesting [ ] interesting [ ] not really interesting [ ] not interesting at all [ ]

13) Have you bought any artwork at a virtual art fair in the past? yes [ ] no [ ]

14) Could you envisage an acquisition of an artwork at a virtual art fair? yes [ ] no [ ] don't know [ ]

D. Your personal relationship to the visual arts

1) You are affected by the visual arts. Who / what did confront you with it for the first time?
my family [ ] my friends [ ] my colleagues on the job [ ] my job itself [ ] exclusively my own experiences [ ]
other, please name:

2) Do you also have a special affinity to other kinds of art? yes, absolutely [ ] yes, to some extent [ ] not really [ ]
2a) If yes: What kinds of art in particular? (multiple choice)
literature [ ] poetry [ ] classical music [ ] opera [ ] ballet [ ] theatre [ ] jazz [ ] popular music [ ] movies [ ]
any kind of art that is interesting and inspiring [ ]
others, please name / specify:

3) In your opinion, what is necessary to appreciate an artwork the right way? (multiple choice)

a sort of spontaneous favor	[ ]	an early acquired familiarity with art and artworks	[ ]
profound knowledge in the history of art	[ ]	nothing than the gift of good taste	[ ]
sensitivity and personality	[ ]	the very quality of an artwork itself	[ ]

other, please name:

4) How would you assess the relationship between the quality of art and the influence of the art market?
Artists / artworks of high quality will always make their way [ ]
Mainly the art market (e.g. museums, exhibitions, galleries, fairs) contributes to the appreciation of artists / artworks [ ]
It is the interplay between the work itself and the art market that makes success and provides quality [ ]

5) If you own (or can imagine to own) artworks, which kind of relationship to them should it be after all? (multiple choice)

a feeling of familiarity and reciprocity	[ ]	a very nice long-term investment	[ ]
a subtle view in a home of beautiful things	[ ]	the only appreciation of art that stands for its own	[ ]

other, please name:

6) In short: What does art mean to you personally?

E. Your assessment of the current tendencies on the art market

1) Do you agree with the thesis that the market price has become more and more the central mark of quality for works of art?
absolutely [ ] partly [ ] not really [ ] not at all [ ]

2) In your opinion, what was the reason of price increases in current works of art? (multiple choice)

increased quality of the art production	[ ]	new groups of purchasers with high incomes	[ ]
growing number of people interested in art	[ ]	demand for art from emerging countries	[ ]
growing number of educated people	[ ]	capital investment and market speculation	[ ]

others, please name:

3) Do you find the prices achieved by contemporary art at the Art Basel Miami Beach:
often too low [ ] appropriate [ ] partly exaggerated [ ] completely exaggerated [ ]

4) Which contemporary artists do you regard as being clearly overvalued by the market (please name)

5) Which contemporary artists do you regard as being clearly undervalued by the market (please name)

6) How would you personally assess the character of purchasers on today's art market? (multiple choice)

There are still many passionate purchasers / collectors in the field	[ ]
It seems more and more a question of prestige that motivates many purchasers	[ ]
In my opinion, now there are increasing financial interests on the art market	[ ]

7) In your opinion which group of actors sets the tone today in the art market? (multiple choice)

the artists	[ ]	the art museums	[ ]	the curators	[ ]
the collectors	[ ]	the art experts	[ ]	the media/art critics	[ ]
the gallery owners	[ ]				
banks, insurances, enterprises	[ ]				

others, please name:

8) In your opinion, which regions/countries will be trend-setting in future art?

9) In your opinion, which currents will be trend-setting in future art?

10) What is your overall impression of / judgement on the global art market today?

F. Your overall impression of Art Basel Miami Beach 2011

In a nutshell, what is your overall impression of / judgement on Art Basel Miami Beach 2011?

You have reached the end of the questionnaire. Many thanks for your participation.

Research interests of Ethnography of Art Basel

Example: The ambivalences of the new order of global Art Market

The traditional western establishment and cultural elite facing the arrival of new wealthy collectors from BRIC-States:

sentiments and ressentiments

Results from the Interviews

Representations and classifications of people inside the art world

Interview with a Swiss mega-collector who defines 3 categories of art buyers

1. Pure art lovers
2. Main stream
3. Speculators

Results from the Interviews

Art is not a commodity like any other! Special features of a market of singular goods

“You cannot just buy art, art will be allocated at will!“

„Kunst kann man nicht einfach kaufen, sie wird zugeteilt!“

A world-renowned European big collector

Results from the Interviews

Art is a cultural capital, to its legitimate acquisition you need in addition to cultural capital also economic capital.

“Who wants to buy culture, should even have culture.”

„Wer Kultur kaufen will, sollte selbst Kultur haben.“

A major Swiss collector

A globalizing art world

Prospective territorial occupations: Western perspectives on a "terra incognita" of the art world

- Asia as the market of the future; almost fatalistic acceptance of the inevitable transformations, which some has to be part of
- Difficulties in the import-export of symbolic goods across very deep cultural boundaries
- Variations of the theme around the opposition between "old money" and old cultural capital and "new money" and social ascension with cultural aspirations
- Underlying a transcultural or global model of elitist distinction

A globalizing art world

The birth of an art field under the aegis of the (global) art market

- Globalization and modernization as catching-up development
- Lack of public institutions which have a sufficient quality – and professional staff
- Relevance of auction houses versus galleries
- Absence of recipients with the necessary cultural capital (educational function is highlighted)

Difference between participation in the global art market and visibility in the global art field of production