On the Economy of Symbolic Goods
Ethnographical Explorations at the Art Basel

Franz Schultheis / Thomas Mazzurana
Art & Market: Alienation or Emancipation? / 17–18 November 2016, St.Gallen
Ethnographical Explorations at the Art Basel

Books

Kunst und Kapital
Begegnungen auf der Art Basel
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Art Unlimited?
Dynamics and Paradoxes of a Globalizing Art World
[transcript] Cultures of Society
Agenda

- 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

the quantitative evolution of art fairs—worldwide

Sources: Artnet, Net and websites
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.”
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 Bourdieu's 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

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
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
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