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The Evolution of the Art Fair

*Christian Morgner**

Abstract: »Die Evolution der Kunstmesse«. This paper focuses on one of the key facets of the global art market, the art fair. Art fairs, which have proliferated in recent years and can be found in large numbers all over the globe, provide a crucial infrastructure for the sale and exhibition of works of art. Despite their current popularity, however, the history of the art fair, the development of its organisational form, and its importance to the market and society have largely been neglected in scholarly studies. Therefore, this paper adopts an evolutionary approach to better understand the development of the art fair, including its network-like structure, and how it became the core business structure of the contemporary art world. This paper demonstrates that art fairs inherited a great number of business practices from previous times, such as observational principles for the creation of prices, aesthetic features, and branding strategies to emphasize their outstanding and almost religious nature. Furthermore, the paper shows that the network-like structure of the art fair has contributed to its contemporary success.

Keywords: Networks, evolutionary economics, history art market, art fair, economy and society.

1. Introduction

There is no doubt that the art fair has become one of the key events in the global art market. In their market report in 2005, the art magazine 'Art + Auction' described the current era as 'the age of the art fair' (as cited in Eckstein 2006), and Paco Barragán's (2008) publication 'The Art Fair Age' has similarly dubbed our time. Besides auction houses and galleries, the art fair is an essential business for the generation of sales in the visual arts market. Art fairs provide a crucial infrastructure for local and international art markets around the globe, and have become an important industry unto themselves (Rubalcaba-Bermejo and Cuadrado-Roura 1995). Not only do art fairs employ a considerable number of workers and have a significant impact on local markets due to their status as tourist destinations, but they can also influence the branding strategies of a city and collaborate with a number of other industries, such as advertising, the hotel sector, art handling, and educational programmes (Eck-

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stein 2006). In consequence, study of art fairs has grown over the last decade. Studies have examined a broad range of art or art-related fairs, such as luxury furniture fairs, high-class fashion weeks, designers, architectural shows, or art fairs (see Larson 1994; Skov 2006; Power and Jansson 2008), all of which exist in a contemporary setting. However, the focus of these studies has often not been on the fair itself, but, for instance, on specific galleries attending art fairs, or the effects of art fairs on export markets, platforms of knowledge exchange, identity formation, or market strategies (see Corrado and Boari 2007; Moeran 2011; Yogev and Grund 2012). Publications that dealt with the art fair in particular addressed mostly the glitz and celebrity status of these events (see Thornton 2008; Thompson 2011) and did not discuss the socio-institutional features on which these ephemeral qualities might be based. However, as Morgner (2014) has demonstrated, the success of the art fair is to be seen in its structuration based on the concept of the network. Network refers in this context to three qualities, 1) the art fair is a network as it links up art dealers, professionals and collectors from distant regions, creating a small-world network, 2) it is a network of mutual observation and 3) it is a network as its results, for instance, related sales or presentation of new talents, sets out criteria for other players in the market, which are thereby drawn into its network and aims to activate the weak ties in the market. As Morgner (2014) indicates this structural invention is not just a modern phenomenon, but is based on a long institutional history. However, this aspect remains largely unexplored. Therefore, it is the goal of this paper to shed light on the historical-institutional background of the art fair by adopting an evolutionary approach to better understand how the development of particular structural elements (evolutionary theory speaks of pre-adaptive advances), namely a network-like structure, has contributed to the rise of the art fair and how it became the core business event of the contemporary art world with all its associated qualities of the glitzy and exceptional.

In examining the historical evolution of the art fair, this paper will attempt to answer three questions: how has the structure of the network contributed to the rise of the art fair despite many historical transformations?; what have been the core institutional features of the art fair as network over time?; and to what extent is has the contemporary art fair implemented the these previous developments and thereby enabled its current success? In seeking answers to these questions, this paper does not simply aim to extend knowledge of the art fair, but also to reconstruct the selective nature of its evolution, to show how changes in societal structure have favoured and fostered new features of the art fair, and to recognize that the historical evolution has resulted in a differentiation of different types of art fairs (e.g., mission art fairs, niche art fairs, peripheral art fairs).

In order to answer the aforementioned questions, this paper will focus on three socio-historical settings throughout the overall development of the art fair that provided important structural features for later developments. The first part of this paper is devoted to the role of religious festivals, which played an im-

portant role in settings up some core institutional features, but more important to cloak these structures through a related semantic. In the second part of the paper, the rise of the artisanal fair as a new type of business and development toward the art fair will be discussed, as the artisanal fair developed several important organisational features that were adopted in many different regions of the globe. The focus is here on the external reach of the art fair and its internal organisation, which enabled the creation of prices and transactions. The last part of this paper is devoted to the rise of the contemporary art fair, and will pay particular attention to the early development, spread, proliferation and changing functions of the art fair in the last sixty years.

2. Religious Festivals, Fairs, and *Messen*

Fairs are thought to have originated from religious festivals, pilgrimages, and other gatherings of worshippers in which religion was blended with commerce (Walford 1967). In ancient times, religious festivals occurred on particular days of the year and were related to seasons or the name days of specific gods. These festivals were known in virtually all of the great ancient empires, including the Roman and Greek Empires, the Aztec and Inca Kingdoms, and during the Han-Dynasty (see Wilson 1847; Wrigley 1919; Pierssens and Bradshaw 1972; Lazarus-Yafeh 1978; Cohn 2011). These civilisations were each marked by strong social differentiation, including the division of labour. Throughout the history of civilization, clerical castes began to emerge, and hierarchical organisation grew to progressively dominate social structures (for an overview, see Finer 1997). The status and power of the ruling elite came to be legitimised through a religious codification of the god-like ruler who possessed other-worldly qualities.

The annual religious festivals of these civilizations were important because they were meant to confirm the exceptional qualities of the ruling elite by means of a display that gathered together the vast population of an empire (Wrigley 1919; Pierssens and Bradshaw 1972; Cohn 2011). For the organisation of such festivals, the daily activities of a population had to be interrupted or even stopped, and people from different areas, tribes, and strata had to gather in a single location. This in turn required a sufficient transportation system, and in particular, safe roads that could only be secured by a powerful ruling elite. Furthermore, to confirm the exceptional nature of the event, it had to be attractive so that a vast number of people would come. Finally, the people attending the event had to be fed, and in many cases they would bring food, goods, and other valuable items with them. These events made use of the networks as follows. They reached out into every corner of the empire, like a spider in a web and thereby gathering vast numbers of the population to one location and a particular time. At these gathering the elite could ‘educate’ their audience,

inform them about general norms and rules, but the audience could also experience the other-worldly quality of the ruler or ruling elite. The event ensured that the norms and rules, where not relevant within the festival, but reached out into the territory being ruled. The religious events was, therefore, based on a structural model of a small-world network. Small-world does in this case not so much refer on the number of links or connections, but on the density created and the strong ties being temporality formed (on this dynamic, see Watts 1999).

It is in this context that events developed a semantic describing their extravagant quality, which draws on the structural features of the network. The word 'fair' derives from the Latin *feriae* meaning holidays, or, holy days. The term also speaks to being free of labour (*feriata*) (Walford 1967). The German word for fair, *Messe*, speaks to the religious origins of fairs as well. *Messe* literally means religious mass, but referred historically to any large-scale religious event. The German word itself derives from the Latin *missa*, which refers to the religious event of the last supper (Mohrmann 1958). However, *missa* also refers to the Greek *pompe*, which means a mission or festive procession (Mohrmann 1958). In summary, the semantic fair embodies three notions: 1) the festive, splendid, and extravagant through connecting distant lands and foreign items; 2) an interruption of daily life, people were being summoned; and 3) a particular purpose or mission, which meant to linkup the social life of these empire apart from the festive occasions.

An important side-effect of the linking of distant lands and people was the accumulation of a large number of items, some of which might be rare and therefore of great value, in a small geographical area. Precious gifts were thus brought to festive events, and special temporary houses were erected for the presentation of these goods. Due to the influx of goods during religious festivals, which were very important to and deeply embedded in the customs of ancient societies, the festivals became increasingly associated with trade. Members of the elite that could afford luxury items were present at the festivals to acquire them for social distinction. The infrastructure of the old kingdoms and empires enabled the transport of rare goods, and resources were available so that these events could occur on a regular basis (Burbank and Cooper 2010). The regularity of imports in turn led to the idea of a consistent regular market. Producers and sellers knew that on the same festival day of the following year they would have the opportunity to sell certain types of goods (Mead 1967). Karl Polyani (1975) has discussed the transformation from gift trade within religious festivals to the market trade of fairs, which was a trend that occurred in most of the great civilisations (for an overview, see the special issue of the *Recueils de la Société Jean Bodin*, 5: *La Foire*, 1953).¹

¹ The Inca elite or council ordained festive occasions when labourers were to come in from the fields to the market and such events were called *catu*, or later *catto* or *cattu* (Wrigley 1919). The Chinese Temple Fair (*miao-houei*) underwent a similar transformation, from a

While religious festivals were rooted in spirituality, and all attendants were to believe in shared values, these festivals developed a central platform for the presentation of valuable goods and amassed a great number of people from distant lands, including powerful elites. The religious event not only provided a structure from which more business-like structures could develop, but also brought a context of religious symbolism to the very actions of business. This religious quality persists in the buying and viewing of art to this day. For example, Sarah Thornton (2008, xi) defines the art market as a group of believers: ‘The contemporary art world is a loose network of overlapping subcultures held together by a belief in art.’

3. The Development of the Artisanal Fair

Early fairs did not emerge as exclusive art fairs,² but as artisanal fairs³ that developed as an unintended effect of religious festivals. Religious festivals were, however, more frequent and held in a wide range of different locations. In contrast, the important annual artisanal fairs were smaller in number and occurred only at a few particular locations. The early artisanal fairs were a common fixture in the Roman Empire. With the disintegration of the Roman Empire in the late 5th century, however, all such organised commerce ceased until the late 7th century and the rise of the Frankish Kingdom. The fair established at Saint-Denis near Paris is an early example of great importance for the later institutional development of artisanal fairs in Europe. From here such fairs spread eastwards⁴ to the Champagne and Flanders regions in the 12th and 14th centuries respectively. In particular, the fairs in Champagne proved to be of great importance for the developing economic practices of the artisanal fair. From here the fair business extended to Geneva and Lyon until the religious wars in France in the 16th century, when the golden age of fairs in Germany and England emerged. Yet such fairs went into decline again in the 18th century while moving further east into Russia trade (the fair in Nijni Novgorod), which greater connected Europe and Asia in. The Russian fairs, however, went out of business in the late 19th century (Allix 1922).

public religious event in which many commodities and types of entertainment were presented, including Chinese opera, horseracing, magical and medical treatments, works of art, and religious rituals, into a commercial or festive occasion (Balazs 1993; Lai 2004).

² The term artisanal is used because the main focus of the fair was on the crafted quality of the goods. Paintings or sculptures were therefore together with other similar items.

³ The term artisanal is used because the main focus of the fair was on the crafted quality of the goods. Paintings or sculptures were therefore together with other similar items.

⁴ This development has been similar in other regions of the globe (In the case of Latin-America, see Wrigley 1919 and for China, see Balazs 1953).

The particular quality of the artisanal fair was no longer through its association with the sacred, but due to its quality as a platform for sales, formation of prices, creation of further transactions and rarity of the items being traded.⁵ It therefore relied on some previous structural features of the festival. The gathering of rare items and people from distant lands and their exchange and delivery to other distant regions.⁶ However, as it will be shown the artisanal fair reformulated the inner structure of the fair. Whereas the religious festivals employed them as platforms to transmit their clerical and political messages, the artisanal fair made use of the fair as a platform for mutual observation. The linking up of observations was important for two reasons, the creation of prices for similar goods and the importance of aesthetic appeal and display for a better differentiation.

3.1 Economic Integration and Formation of Prices

In the 12th century, the great fairs of Champagne appeared. These cities were located near major caravan route intersections, but more importantly, the nobles of these regions (Henry the Liberal and Theobald the Great) managed to create a protective system for those travelling to these fairs, as well as for those who conducted business at them (Bautier 1953; Berlow 1971; Schönfelder 1988; Edwards and Ogilvie 2011). In regards to these fairs, two particular network-like features stand out, the so-called ‘conduct of fairs’ and the ‘ward of fairs’. The former refers to a protective system for all merchants travelling to a fair. Since such protection could in principle only be exercised on the territory under the direct rule of a lord, a system of neighbouring lords had to be established to ensure the conduct of travellers. Thus, the organisers of the fair ensured that merchants from distant lands could be linkup at a particular location. The ‘ward of fairs’ principle refers to a system of wardens or police that protected trade at a fair by ensuring that contracts were fulfilled, and that its attendants and goods were kept safe. If a contract went unfulfilled, the wardens could sanction the perpetrator by confiscating their goods, or by excluding them from the fair. The fairs “were regularly frequented by merchants from all parts of Europe and northern Africa, Palestine and Syria, and Asia Minor” (Alliex 1922, 536). They were also visited by Russian and Chinese merchants. Due to their international nature, the fairs thus had to install a financial system of credit and money clearing (as all sorts of ‘currencies’ were circulated), as

⁵ The rarity of the items at these fairs was a result of three main factors: 1) materials were not readily available to buyers in the area of the festival; 2) nor was the expertise of a master craftsman available to make the items; and 3) the fair occurred only a few times a year, which restricted access to the items. Thus, the geographical location of a fair was of great importance, where for a short time these rare goods would be concentrated (for more details on the notion of rarity, see Moulin 1978).

⁶ As Walford states, “the great fairs have succeeded because of their situation on great highways of communication” (1967, 541).

well as ensure that debts incurred by merchants from far off would be paid. This aspect was of great importance, because it assured that the business and transactions conducted at the fair, would not only be binding within its immediate and interactive setting, but stretch out and thereby integrate and linkup the sales-partners outside of the fair.

As such, the new artisanal fair evolved into a central institution of pre-modern economies. These economies relied on two key institutions: the household, and patron-client relationships (Egner 1985; Lytle and Orgel 1981). The concern of the household was the provisioning of its members, while patron-client relationships were built on a concept of mutual exchange (for instance, providing protection in exchange for goods). Both structures were thus based on a concept of subsistence economy that did not provide a great surplus of resources (Egner 1985). Therefore, the artisanal fair became an important structure in this kind of economy, as it allowed for economic surplus and profit with regard to scarce items (Epstein 1994). These network-like structures are not different from older models. The linking-up of merchants in an interactive setting brought about a new possibility within this mere economic setting, namely, the formation of prices through mutual and direct observation. The market model inherent is that of the market as mirror, as developed in the theory of the network by Harrison C. White (1981). The main idea of White's model is that the formation of prices is not according to their possible demand, but due to the observation of other competitors in the market. As it will be shown the spatial structure of the artisanal fair is crucial is providing a platform of a comparative nature, which resembles modern markets. In this context, it is important to mention that the production of goods was not very standardised at the time, thus the quality of products varied. This is one of the main reasons why the buyer, seller, and goods all had to be in one location: goods could be inspected and prices could be negotiated first hand. As Face (1958) notes that the fairs were divided into different temporal stages. Goods could only be sold on particular days of the fair. Thus, within a number of days, all of the goods of a particular category were amassed at the fair and could thereby be compared.⁷ Prices were then determined by comparing the different products, and as such they were an observational category. Harrison C. White (2008) notes that a network is formed when elements of the network try control other elements and when these elements led themselves being guided by these control efforts. Thus, prices were formed through linking and contrasting the different goods being presented.

⁷ This arrangement support the bandwidth hypothesis, which suggests that strong and redundant connections ensure a reliable flow of data, so that everyone in the network is informed. In such a setting the impression of certainty is much more likely to develop.

3.2 Display, Arrangement, and Aesthetic Appeal

The temporal organisation of the fairs, as well as the great numbers of merchants, were arranged according to the goods sold. This ensured that the same products could be compared to others in the same category. Due to this, the spatial organisation of the fair naturally began to develop along with questions of display and aesthetic appeal. Daniel Defoe (1927) provides a vivid account of the Stourbridge fair⁸ in his *A Trip to the Stourbridge Faire*:

the shops are placed in rows like streets, whereof one is call'd Cheapside; and here, as in several other streets, are all sorts of trades, who sell by retale, and who come principally from London with their goods; scarce any trades are omitted, goldsmiths, toyshops, brasiers, turners, milleners, haberdashers, hatters, mercers, drapers, pewtrers, china-warehouses, and in a word all trades that can be named in London; with coffee-houses, taverns, brandy-shops, and eating-houses, innumerable, and all in tents, and booths (81).

In the next citation, Defoe goes on to describe important parameters of the fair, namely, its size and the wide range of industries it covers. The fair had an orderly arrangement, including rows with designated labels and shops gathered in a specific area in tents or booths. If the fairs were not organised in an open space, they were held in temporary buildings or tents that were specifically erected for the fair. There was also a pavilion with refreshments for the various classes of visitors.

In another street parallel with the road are like rows of booths, but larger, and more intermingled with wholesale dealers, and one side, passing out of this last street to the left hand, is a formal great square, form'd by the largest booths, built in that form, and which they call the Duddery [...] This place is separated, and peculiar to the wholesale dealers in the woollen manufacture. Here the Booths, or tents, are of a vast extent, have different apartments, and the quantities of goods they bring are so great, that the insides of them look like another Blackwell-Hall, being as vast ware-houses pil'd up with goods to the top. In this Duddery, as I have been inform'd, there have been sold one hundred thousand pounds worth of woollen manufactures in less than a week's time [...] I saw one ware-house, or booth, with six apartments in it, all belonging to a dealer in Norwich stuffs only, and who they said had there above twenty thousand pounds value, in those goods, and no other (81).

The above passage speaks to the functional and aesthetic way that booths and products would be arranged to enhance the quality of the goods. The quality of the display of the goods presented is enhanced by a clustering of similar indus-

⁸ The Stourbridge Fair was one of England's most important fairs. It was established in the 12th century, but went, with the arrival of canals and improved roads, into decline in the late 18th century. Defoe's account refers to the later stages of the fair, but the peripheral status also meant that the fair could survive relatively untouched in contrast to its continental counterparts. Additionally, it can be said that similar, but more fragmented, accounts have survived of earlier fairs (see Addison 1953).

tries and products. Booths at the squares appear to be of a higher quality, as they were easier to spot, and the quantity of products is astonishing and surprising. Furthermore, the vast tents give an impression of greatness, providing the retailers with a semblance of glamour.

3.3 The Rise of the Dealer

The buyer-seller relationship at fairs was usually a direct one. Those who brought the goods to the fair owned them, and buyers bought them for themselves (for their own consumption or further trade). Early on, a middleman or dealer who organised the business at a fair was not common. However, this changed in 16th century Antwerp and at the early book fairs.⁹ The city of Antwerp became a great place of trade in the 16th century, with a respectable portion of foreign merchants living in the city and exporting goods to many regions. Art professionals thus found therein a well-developed market, an audience for their products, and skilled workers. As proto-industrial workshops introduced the division of labour and standardised production methods, the commercial infrastructure of Antwerp could boast sales *en masse* to an international clientele. New formats and themes (landscape paintings and depictions of everyday life) emerged as the city reacted to a new community of buyers, and Antwerp progressively became the leading centre of commercial trade in Europe (Stock 1993).

It is in this context that the first dealers and their shops, called *Schilderspanden* (the painters' hall), first appeared (Vermeylen 2000, 2001). The word *pand* means gallery or cloister, a place where one sells certain merchandise or walks around. The *panden* were once the central sales platforms run by religious institutions, but new forms of commercialisation eventually overtook the *Schilderspanden* (Vermeylen 2002, 81). The *Schilderspanden* became linked to artisanal fairs as art dealers could lease a booth from fair organisers (for example, the civic government of Antwerp). Here, for a temporary period, art dealers could come together and form a collection of dealers to attract a local and international clientele. The art dealer became a brokerage structure, which overcomes gaps in the network (see Burt 2005, 15), namely the dealer links seller and buyers, but also enables the sales through provision of external funding. On this basis the dealers formed large network of friends, families, and other professionals. They had the education, social capital, and man-power to organise and build ties with buyers and artisans from other countries for sales in distant regions (Vermeylen 2006).

⁹ The early book fairs developed a similar type of dealer, known as the publisher (see Weidhaas 2003, 31).

3.4 The Decline of the Artisanal Fairs

With improvements in communication and transportation in the 17th and 18th centuries, as well as the global standardisation of goods that came with the age of the machine, the artisanal fair was gradually replaced by the sample fair (Luckhurst 1951), where local, national, and international fairs would assemble their objects. In contrast to artisanal fairs, these fairs were not designed to sell products on the spot, but to encourage industrial production and advertise new items. While these industrial exhibitions began to present artworks from various countries, they did not immediately become the leading structure for art fairs, as the French salon style of art exhibition and similar forms in other countries were still quite popular (White and White 1965).¹⁰ This period of the French salon and industrial exhibitions was short-lived, and with the decline of world exhibitions and the academies due the collapse of the European Empires and aristocratic class, older models of selling precious works enjoyed a revival.¹¹ The market of commissioning works was replaced by a market of collectors. Nonetheless, this type of art market was still in its infancy, and would require the sales platforms provided by the great cities of the early 20th century to truly flourish.

4. Contemporary Art Fairs

It is not surprising that contemporary art fairs emerged in countries such as Germany and Switzerland.¹² Cities such as New York City, London, or Paris had already attained a high density of networked art dealers, yet those in Germany and Switzerland had no such concentrations. While in Cologne there were only a few modern galleries before 1967, the Rhineland had a solid base of collectors and an overall stable market. While art dealers were scattered across Germany, they were well-connected via informal networks that were hidden to the international art market. Art Cologne thus meant to provide a platform where, through the concentration of art dealers and through which a

¹⁰ The Salon exhibitions or early biennials did not include dealers, but a juried commission selected the artists, who sold their works directly. Few contemporary art fairs have copied this model.

¹¹ At religious festivals around the Place Dauphine in Paris, a sort of art market/fair emerged, where everybody could display and sell their items.

¹² There were other experiments around this time, like street fairs, with the 57th Street Art Fair in Chicago as an early example of such a juried exhibition. These fairs copied the Salon exhibitions or early biennales, but only assembled the artists and not art dealers. This type of fair remained in a minor position in the overall art market.

greater visibility for the German art market could be achieved (Baus 2000).¹³ Early attempts at structured selling in Cologne included holding an art exhibition (much like Kassel's *Dokumente*) (see Baus 2000, 50), but the structure of the art fair ultimately proved more successful for Art Market Cologne (*Kunstmarkt Köln*), later to be called Art Cologne. As Art Cologne fair was modelled after the Stuttgart Antiquarian Book Fair (a fair of highly valued and rare objects) (Mehring 2008), it was felt that it should pay attention to its self-presentation and quality of display so as to bring international attention to Germany throughout the year.¹⁴ In the beginning, Art Cologne was geographically restricted to German galleries. It was also restricted in terms of its space, and thus to a certain number of attendees. These constraints led to the formation of another art fair, namely Art Basel. Although Art Basel was mainly local in terms of art dealers and collectors, these attending dealers expressed an interest in finding collectors from abroad. Basel's fair is similar to Cologne's in terms of its arrangement and display (both resembled artisanal or antique fairs) (cf. Harris 2011), and only art dealers, not auction houses or single artists, could participate. There was a juried selection process, and the art dealers had to rent a booth within the fair. Art Basel utilized a dual network structure upon its inception: first, it sought to assemble informal networks of art dealers and galleries at one place at a particular time to facilitate connections between them and expand their outlook. Second, it created a network that connected dealers, collectors, and professionals from outside of the local networks attending the fair.

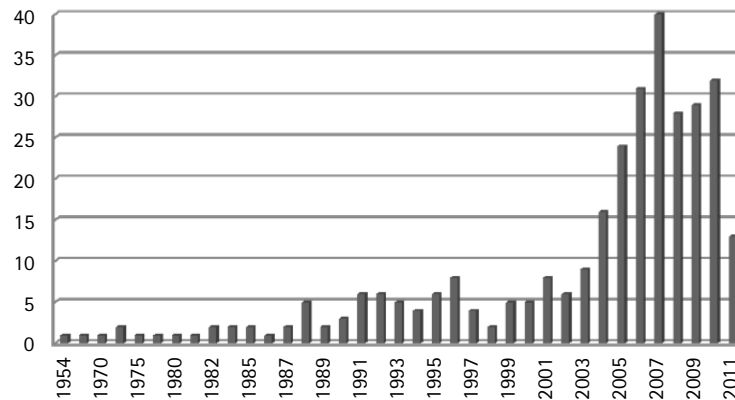
This arrangement of these contemporary art fairs resembles earlier events, where a certain number of professional art dealers come together under one roof to display and sell paintings, sculptures, and other craftworks, such as silverware or jewellery. However, the contemporary arrangement stressed the notion of the network itself. The linking-up of the different art dealers meant that they would not only pass their reputation upon each other, but also to the event itself. Art Cologne or Art Basel became labels of their own bringing greater attention to the location and attracting an international clientele. The dealers can multiply their efforts by networking with other dealers and acquiring new buyers. For instance, buyer that would come for a particular gallery, could also discover artists of other art dealers. Thus, the contemporary art fair embraces, in particular, the role of weak ties for their organisation (see Granovetter 1973). Whereas former fairs had to rely on a network of direct or strong ties, it is now the quality of potential contacts or weak ties, which the fairs means to activate.

¹³ The art fair combines the concept of the network in two ways; 1) as a linking up of resources, also common among family businesses (see Colli 2003, 24) and 2) a linking up of information and mutual observation, which is typical for creative industrial districts (see Camagni and Salone 1993).

¹⁴ This idea was soon copied, and the fair 'Prospect 68' opened its doors in Dusseldorf in 1969.

Art Cologne and Art Basel were both highly successful¹⁵ in employing this kind of network structure, it is no wonder that FIAC in Paris and Arte Fiera in Bologna both reproduced the structure in 1974. Since the late 1960s, the number of art fairs has grown to the point where several hundred are known to exist today.

Figure 1: Number of Art Fair Foundations, 1954–2011



Source: Artfacts 2011 and my own research, n= 315 Art Fairs.

Until the 1990s, the foundation-rate of art fairs remained relatively low, with no more than one or two founded each year. This was due to the function of the art fair up to that point, which sought to create a network only for galleries located in or specialising in a peripheral market. The first great art fairs did not emerge in places such as London or New York City, but in countries that did not possess a great concentration of galleries in a particular city and did not have a highly developed art market. These countries' galleries were often geographically scattered or clustered in relatively small areas, which, as a result, could not attract wide attention. Nonetheless, they possessed an array of wealthy collectors, or were able to attract them from abroad. The first type of these art fairs appeared in cities such as Basel, Cologne, Ghent, Madrid, Brussels or Bologna, which were not hotspots in the international art market before the 1990s.

¹⁵ Within five days, a turnover of 1 million German Marks was achieved at the first Art Cologne. At that time, a new VW had a price of about 5,000 German Marks. The price of a VW was therefore three times higher than the price of a painting by Gerhard Richter, which cost 1,500 German Marks.

In the late 1980s, a second type of art fair, the niche art fair, appeared in places such as New York City and London. These small fairs were closely attached to the hot spots of the world art market, and thus could make use of an existing network of art dealers. The niche art fair brought attention to more peripheral products that were usually not exhibited, namely, works on paper, drawings, watercolours, and other similar works. In 1988, art fair producer Sanford Smith (1988, n.p.) observed that ‘Almost every gallery [he] visited had a closet full of works on paper; drawings, prints, watercolours [...] Works that could not compete with more expensive artworks for wall space.’ One year later, Smith founded the art fair ‘Works on Paper’ in New York City.

Table 1: Niche Art Fairs Founded in the 1980s

Name of the Fair	Foundation	Location
London Art Fair	1988	London (England)
20/21 British Art Fair	1988	London (England)
The London Original Print Fair	1985	London (England)
Modernism: A Century of Style and Design	1986	New York City, NY
IFPDA – The International Fine Print Dealers Association	1987	New York City, NY
The ADAA Art Show	1988	New York City, NY
Works on Paper	1989	New York City, NY

Source: Artfacts 2011 and my own research.

Niche fairs (Table 1) are located within a well-developed market and require a varied structure because their attending galleries tend to be engaged in side businesses. London-based shows have focused on prints, drawings, and other such mediums, typically by British modernist artists only. New York-based shows have focused on prints and fine art. All of these shows were founded in the late 1980s during a brief boom in the art market, when financial security, the economic bubble in Japan, and other markets contributed to constantly rising prices and specialisation within the world market. In this context, a new wave of dealers and artists began to market themselves. The art market developed such a great demand that even niche products could, if presented in a more cohesive or condensed form, be successfully sold (Ardenne 1995). In sum, the active and strong art markets of economic centres and a developing periphery in the world art market contributed to the revival of the art fair. Art dealers from distant countries would present their unique selections in a particular space at a particular time, and create an atmosphere of exceptional art to attract even more dealers and professionals from abroad.

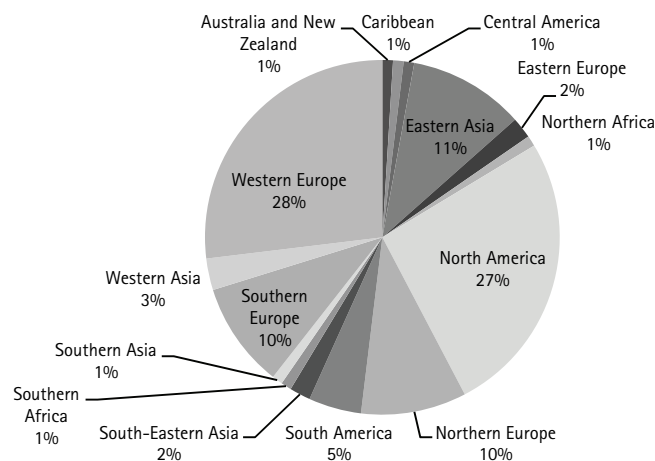
However, the golden years of the art fair came to an abrupt end in the late 1980s with the collapse of the Japanese bubble economy (Hiraki 2009).¹⁶ The

¹⁶ With the collapse of the Japanese bubble economy in the late 1980s, Japan lost its significant position as an importer of paintings, drawings and other works of art, from 36.1% (\$3.4 billion) in 1990, down to 6.6% in 1995, to a mere 4.1% in 1998 (Ramsdale 2000, 41).

art market faltered, and many galleries went bankrupt while several were on the brink of closure. This turbulence in the market was felt both in central art locations and throughout the periphery. Thus, art dealers developed two strategies to cope with the social turbulence. Established art dealers moved their pieces into established art fairs, such as Art Basel and Art Cologne, turning them into hot-spots, while art dealers in the periphery used art fairs as tools to cope with the crisis. A large number of peripheral and niche art fairs were founded following the economic turbulence, including photo l.a. XX | artLA projects, Winter Fine Art & Antiques Fair, Olympia, ArteBA, FLECHA (Feria de Liberación de Espacios Comerciales Hacia el Arte), Artesantander, and Internationale Triennale für Originaldruckgrafik.

Even the Armoury Show in New York City falls into this category, which was founded as a hotel fair in 1994. By the end of the 1990s, the world of art fairs had developed a stable tripartite structure. There were now primary, (Art Basel) secondary, (ArteBA) and niche art fairs (photo l.a. XX | artLA projects). By the end of the 1990s, the crisis of the art market was over, and the general view of art fairs merely as tools that came in handy during an economic crisis began to fade. By then, the art fair as an institution had been thoroughly tested and proven. In particular, its inclusion in different social settings confirmed the concept of the art fair as being applicable to many different contexts. As a result of its adaptability, the art fair became a global institution.

Figure 2: Art Fairs by Region, Founded between 1999-2010



Source: ArtFacts¹⁷

¹⁷ Please note that the rounding caused by the statistical software causes the percentages in the chart to add up to a number greater than 100.

The art fair began to evolve not simply in reaction to societal circumstances, but in regards to other fairs as well. Local profiles began to emerge in contrast to those from abroad. Consequently, the art fair evolved beyond a simple gathering of art dealers and their represented artists to rely on homophile-based networks of similar art dealers (cf. Yogeve and Grund 2012) to shape an image. Such profiling not only worked to achieve distinction from other fairs of a similar status, but framed locations in which other sub-fairs or satellite fairs can emerge. Thus, the fairs developed their reputations in a network-like relation to each other. As a consequence of this, branding strategies evolved to establish a particular image, such as being established, conservative, creative, intellectual, or exotic, to build anticipation of what will be seen. This development is almost looping back in time, as another type of art fair emerged that could be called the mission art fair, which pays reference to the origin of the word fair itself.

5. Summary

This paper reviewed the evolution of one of the key facets of the global art market, the art fair. Although the art fair appears as a rather recent development, this paper demonstrates the historical nature of its business practices and organisational structure and the reliance of the fair on the concept of the network and its rereading an implementation according to different needs in the art market. The origin of the art fair actually derives from the religious festival in Antiquity. Religious festivals were unique occurrences that were different from daily routines and other spectacles. They were events where not only works were put on display, but a specific message or mission was to be broadcast. They linked-up vast parts of a kingdom or empire. For a short time the religious fairs provided a small-world network model, in which the most important parts of the populations, but also cultural and political norms were facilitated.

The early artisanal fairs could rely on their religious association with the extraordinary to bring together buyers and sellers. These were, however, not art fairs in the modern sense, because these fairs displayed rare and valuable items in an artisanal sense, such as, requiring particular skills to craft them. Through this set-up, the artisanal fair evolved into a central institution within pre-modern economies. Crucial to the exchange of rare goods, it brought together merchants from disparate regions, its spatial structure enabled a comparative structure for the formation of prices, and its annual recurrence made it reliable for the production and sale of goods. The pricing model of the artisanal fair relied on a concept of direct interaction or strong ties, through which mutual observation and network-like control (Harrison C. White) became possible. The comparative quality of the fair in terms of its goods spurred the internal differentiation of sellers into booths with distinct aesthetic displays, a custom that is common within art fairs to this day.

Although the artisanal fair almost vanished with the age of industrial production, it experienced a revival in the second half of the 20th century. At this time the fair combined historical characteristics such as the grandiose quality of the fair and its ability to facilitate international networking to create a new market platform in more peripheral areas of the art market. Early art fairs of the 20th century began as business structures that could facilitate business activities in the peripheral areas of the art market. Galleries that were spread out and/or dealing with less attractive works of art could unite and thereby increase their presence in the market. They meant to activate the weak ties of the art market. This structure proved to be successful, and a second type art fair, the niche fair, developed based on its success.

The collapse of the art market bubble in the late 1980s was a watershed moment for the art fair. Art dealers and galleries of secondary reputation founded new art fairs to stay afloat in a sinking market. Their assembly and linkage made them more visible to the few collectors at the centre of the art market. On the other hand, the established galleries, which were equally hit hard by the economic changes, moved into existing fairs to form new networks and thereby change the status of these art fairs. When the crisis of the art market was over by the end of the 1990s, the art fair continued to evolve. Art fairs began to emerge in reaction to other art fairs, and the world of art fairs was progressively transformed with new profiles and hierarchical structures beginning to be developed. Art fairs began to emphasize their locality as a mode of distinction so as to differentiate themselves from other fairs. Thus, the last sixty years witnessed not just the rise of the art fair, but the proliferation of many different types of fairs, each with their own unique histories.

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