

Conference report

“The Art Fair”, London, 13 - 15 July 2017

by Helene Bosecker and Susanne Meyer-Abich

Not only did the first conference organized by The International Art Market Studies Association¹ offer an ambitious programme involving partly parallel sessions, a double act conference pre-programme and not one but two keynote events, it also chose as its subject a much-discussed market vehicle, at least in terms of contemporary art: the art fair. To anticipate the conclusion of this report, these reviewers both felt that the conference was an unqualified success in terms of attendance, variety and quality of papers presented, as well as regarding the essential aspect of logistics, never to be disregarded at conferences.

The sessions were structured to cover methodological approaches to art fairs in “Mapping the Art Fair”, quality control in “Standards of Quality and Vetting”, and the history of this type of event in “Historical and Geographical Contexts”, while branching out into innovative or novel approaches in sessions called “Experimentation” and “Biennales and Nascent Fairs”. There was ample room for debate after each paper, additional panel discussions after each session and, vitally, many opportunities for networking and informal exchanges during breaks. The parallel session format involved a certain amount of movement by participants up, down and across the warren of rooms and stairs that is typical for Georgian townhouses converted to offices in London. This fostered unexpected encounters and contributed to a vivacious atmosphere overall.

Approximately three quarters of the attendees came from academic institutions, while independent researchers, museum curators and dealers were also present, as were art fair employees, students and a few lawyers. In general, the mix was international and made for lively discussions. These were chaired by well-known figures in academic art

1 TIAMSA was founded in 2016 as an association of art market professionals and scholars. Cf. <https://www.artmarketstudies.org/about/>, accessed on 25 November 2017. It is chaired by Johannes Nathan, who is also co-founder of Forum Kunst und Markt /Centre for Art Market Studies, publishers of this journal.

market research such as Olav Velthuis (University of Amsterdam), Susanna Avery-Quash (National Gallery, London), Johannes Nathan (Nathan Fine Art), Kim Oosterlinck (Université Libre de Bruxelles), Jonathan Woolfson (Sotheby's Institute) and Veronika Korbei (TIAMSA, Art Market Dictionary). The fact that the art fair generated contributions of considerable range and depth, and met with substantial interest from the academic community and others, demonstrates the potential in art market research. While the field is now widely established, it will certainly continue to benefit from such excellent opportunities for debate.

Looking back at the range of papers and associated events, this summary report will certainly not be able to do justice to every speaker, but there were several main themes that emerged from the complexity of proceedings.

Historical context before 1945

The first keynote lecture by Sophie Raux introduced the historic background for art fair activity. In the stringent framework of Southern Netherlandish guild statutes, fairs were one of the lesser regulated area of art commerce, and turned out to be highly successful in feeding the demand for ready-made art. From here, the art market began to diversify, into professional art dealers with showrooms, the hugely popular lotteries, and art auctions. Filip Vermeulen's talk inspected the historical roots of the art fair in Antwerp in detail, with particular focus on spaces used as dedicated sale platforms, sixteenth century dealers' marketing strategies, and an art market that was in many ways not that dissimilar to today's. Jumping ahead several centuries, Meike Hopp's paper on the Frankfurt art fair in the 1920s (read in absentia) outlined the challenges of this format, as the establishment of art auctions in conjunction with a gallery scene and an art fair turned out to be too much of a challenge in an economically difficult climate.

While not directly art fair-related, the "historical" strand in the dual pre-conference programme also took attendees to the Agnew's archives now held at the National Gallery, with Alan Crookham presenting stock books and day books from the rich resource of documents relating to this pre-eminent picture dealing firm, followed by a tour of National Gallery picture highlights led by Susanna Avery-Quash.

The Post-War genesis of the contemporary art fair

The mother of all contemporary art fairs is usually considered to be the Cologne Art Fair, founded in 1967. Nadine Oberste-Hetbleck presented historical data on the galleries exhibiting at this venerable institution, outlining in particular the changing strategies of restricting access for foreign participants. It would have been fascinating to include some background about the collecting culture in the Rhineland that made these market developments possible, but perhaps not feasible in the timeframe. Giving a wider context for the Cologne art fair, Norma Ladewig and Martin Hartung each spoke about aspects relating to the political environment during the time, and the demand for democratization of the art market – an approach that may seem quaint from today's perspective,

where some art fairs are regularly criticized for their exclusivity and catering to the one percent. Martin Hartung reminded the audience of the heady days of artist protests during the 1970s, which also targeted a market system perceived as closed to outsiders, while concurrently employing strategies for self-promotion in the art market system. In a dense and informative paper, Clarissa Ricci spoke about the sales department at the Venice Biennale which was highly successful during the decades after 1945, making the Biennale another precursor of today's art fair structures, while also being affected by political events. Ricci showed the changes from institutional to private buyers and the characteristics resulting from this new clientele, the leading figures of the sales department and the event's process of self-definition.

Parallels between the Art Fair and other structures

While today's art fairs present themselves to a certain extent as unique, exclusive and unusual events, they are in fact not that dissimilar from trade fairs in general and from the world of luxury commerce. This aspect was explored in a revealing and instructive paper by David Bellingham, who compared the modern art fair to the shopping mall. It became clear that the commercial spaces adopt very similar strategies, for example of slightly disorientating the visitor in order to encourage longer browsing periods, adopting a 'surprise' strategy in the offering, and of including similar architectural elements. From a different perspective, Karen van den Berg (in absentia) outlined parallels with non-art-related trade fairs, where corporate identity is communicated by a programme of accompanying talks and information that is not simply a by-programme, but essential to the undertaking in every way, as it generates sustained interest until the next fair.

Mapping and data analysis: opportunities and pitfalls

Since 2000, the annual TEFAF report has of course been the most established and widely-read business report on the state of the art market in general.² This reporting field is also diversifying further with reports specifically created for contemporary art, and a number of papers at the conference illustrated the trend for analysing any available facts and figures on the still relatively opaque art market in a format that is in line with the aesthetics of economic reporting. Rachel Pownall and Sofia Evangelou presented the current TEFAF report with particular focus on the art fair phenomenon and its interaction with other channels of the art market. Elisabetta Lazzaro and Nathalie Moureau focused on contemporary art fair data provided by one of the main commercial database providers, with view to documenting international diversity and identifying trends. As ever, the availability of data depends on cooperation from art market participants, which qualifies such research. From an interdisciplinary perspective, Stoyan Sgourev presented a quantitative data analysis relating to both biennales and art fairs, followed by a lively discussion about whether this could be regarded as a one-size-fits-all approach. Ronit Milano presented the potential of online sales platforms as a democratizing and globally

2 On 19 January 2018, it was announced that the TEFAF report in its current format would be discontinued after eighteen years (ArtNet news).

accessible factor in the market. However, it became clear in the subsequent discussion that there is a considerable lack of transparency for online art sales, which substantially affects buyers' trust in a selling agent that is by definition remote and outside the usual relationship-based structure. The majority of players in this area have yet to produce reliable documentation of a successful business model, and the indication of significant economic difficulties is usually only declared by the public folding of the business.

Regional developments across the globe

In line with art market trends, Asia was an important subject and explored in several talks. Hua Shuo took a closer look on the infrastructural changes the Hong Kong art scene underwent since the 1990's, based on data from the Asia Art Archive as well as from a variety of interviews with Chinese art market protagonists, generating a qualitative map indicating significant growth. Linzhi Zhang complemented these observations with a focus on mainland China, where a gallery system with norms and standard practices is a relatively recent phenomenon, but art fairs will certainly be able to establish this market further. I-Yi Hsieh's paper took as its subject the Shanghai Biennale in 2016/17, that involved events around the city and set out to generate social and cultural dialogue within the wider framework of the global aesthetic economy. A combined paper by Simeng Chang, Marilena Vecco and Robereto Zanola looked at contemporary art fairs in mainland China.

Daniela Stocco's paper (read in absentia) focused on the growth of the art market in Brazil, with four contemporary art fairs in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro alone. Across the Atlantic, ARCOLisboa tries to position itself as a boutique art fair, as outlined in the paper by Adelaide Duarte.

Marta Pérez Ibáñez and Isidro López-Aparicio presented their ongoing research on Spanish artists. Based on responses to a questionnaire, Ibanez took a closer look on the income, the infrastructure and the challenges of the art scene in Spain, including traditional as well as alternative approaches such as a self-organized art fair, the FAC (Fiera de arte en mi casa).

Integrating other aspects

Yasmin Railton and Gareth Fletcher outlined different strategies to increase consumer confidence at art fairs as an extension of existing vetting processes, be it through the use of technology for older artworks, or through integrating provenance information. It was obvious that that there is no perfect solution. While technical progress has led to scientific methods becoming more accessible, and one of the multi-national auction houses now even owns a scientific research company, any machine will only ever be as good as the expert interpreting the data and guiding the analysis. Similarly, Fletcher's field studies and numerous examples illustrated the indisputable fact that provenance information at

art fairs in general seems to be at some distance from complete and transparent availability, while a vendor does not have to provide legal title to objects offered for sale.

Aspects relating to today's art fairs

The current popular understanding of an art fair is to some extent shaped by the global success of Art Basel. A second keynote event offered a pertinent and well-presented discussion between Noah Horowitz, Director Americas of Art Basel, and Olav Velthuis, professor at the university of Amsterdam. A number of talks went into the details of today's art fairs. With a detailed look on three art fairs which are based in Basel, Tina Haisch and Max Menzel showed similarities and differences of the event conceptions. Individual curation of the gallery booth and corporate identity are of increasing importance. Deborah Schultz presented the historical development at fairs, from a flea-market atmosphere to a well-chosen display of artworks as an extended exhibition space of a permanent gallery. Pricing at art fairs is a perennial subject for discussion, as Erica H. Coslor pointed out in her presentation. The individual reasons which define a price level by galleries remain opaque. One challenge for current art market research is certainly to address a much-criticized lack of transparency, that supports a narrative of the art market as an area of inscrutable processes only understood by insiders. Two contributions focused on the relationship between the artist and the art fair: Stephanie Dieckvoss presented her research on the role performances are playing in the context of an art fair. With a historical perspective on the last years and a contemporary reflection, Dieckvoss pointed to the problems which are raised at the moment when artist expression is instrumentalized as an entertainment factor within the framework of a life-style event, with a concurrent loss of artistic autonomy. Diego Mantoan argued that different spaces of exhibiting art influence artistic production, generating works implicitly made for biennales or art fairs. For example, a biennale may present works that are outside the boundaries of marketable properties, while related works by the same artist with more saleable qualities are offered in parallel at an art fair.

The second, "contemporary" strand of pre-conference events also offered a tour of the recently opened London branch of Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac.

Helene Bosecker is a PhD student with Professor Bénédicte Savoy at Technische Universität Berlin. The subject of her research is the relationship between Georg Treu and Auguste Rodin. She is working as an art historian at galerie gerken in Berlin. Susanne Meyer-Abich is an art historian and art market professional, and the editor of this journal.