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Realities

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Abstract

Die vorliegende Masterarbeit analysiert Kunstmessen als Orte, an denen internationale Ambitionen auf die institutionellen und wirtschaftlichen Realitäten des lokalen Kunstmarktes treffen. Obwohl Wien als eines der führenden europäischen Künstler- und Kulturzentren gilt, nimmt der österreichische Markt im globalen Kunstsysteem eine semi-peripher Position ein. Empirische Forschung, die auf theoretischen Ansätzen der Wirtschaftsanthropologie und der Anthropologie der Kunstwelten basiert, zeigt, dass die deklarierte Internationalität der Wiener Kunstmessen primär symbolischer und performativer Natur ist. Obwohl die Messen als international positioniert gelten, bleiben sie in ihren Praktiken – der Struktur der Teilnehmenden, des Publikums und der Verkäufe – weitgehend lokal begrenzt. Dies resultiert in einem Phänomen der scheinbaren Internationalisierung, bei dem der internationale Status als Instrument zur Legitimierung lokaler Praktiken dient, jedoch ohne zu einer nachhaltigen transnationalen Integration beizutragen.

Schlüsselwörter: Kunstmesse, Kunstwelt, Kunstmarkt, Internationalität, Lokalität, Wien

Abstract

Present master thesis analyses art-fairs as spaces where international ambitious confronts institutional and economic realities of the local art-market. Despite the Vienna's branding as one of the leading European artist and cultural centres, Austrian market takes the semi-peripheral position in the global art system. Based on the theoretical approaches of economic anthropology and anthropology of art worlds, the empirical research demonstrates that the declared internationality of Vienna's art fairs is primarily symbolic and performative. Although the fairs are positioned as international, at the level of practices - the structure of participants, audiences and sales - they remain mainly local. This results in a phenomenon of apparent internationalisation, when international status serves as a tool for legitimising local practices without leading to sustainable transnational integration.

Key words: art fairs, art worlds, art market, internationality, locality, Vienna

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Part I. Conceptual and Methodological Foundations

1. Introduction

In late October, I met with one of Vienna's gallerists in his gallery space, hidden next to the usual tourist routes. The day was unexpectedly sunny, and the light gently filled the room as the fallen leaves swirled slowly outside the large windows. The gallery was open, but there were no visitors at that hour, and our conversation unfolded in a calm and almost intimate atmosphere. I was looking forward to discuss the ongoing crisis in the art world, within which I was trying to determine Austria's position – a market riding a wave of high expectations, yet confronting a rather turbulent reality.

The gallerist, well known in professional circles, immediately took a critical distance from Austria's current art system - a stance, he described as rare but necessary. During our conversation, he spoke in detail about the shortcomings of the local market and the lack of a stable audience capable of understanding contemporary art and appreciating its quality. According to him, it was not so much a matter of lack of interest, but a shortage of expertise and visual literacy, which are cultivated over years and require ongoing engagement with the international context.

The lack of a significant international component served both as a starting point for defining the context of the discussion and as an important basis for critique of the existing Austrian art system. The gallerist saw evidence of the insularity of the Viennese art scene in the lack of international connections. He described the local art market as a space that functioned by inertia and only rarely entered into genuine competitive interaction with the outside art world, comparing this situation to a '*frozen state*', in which actors continue to reproduce familiar practices without reassessing them and without experiencing outside pressures that could start a change. At the same time, he insisted that international origin alone does not guarantee an artwork's artistic value, just as being local is not a sign of inferiority:

There is a rather weak local market comprised of individuals who are not particularly well-educated and lack the ability to discern the difference between good and bad international artworks. This is why I want to place international art in a more relative context. Just because something is international does not make it better or more effective (Interview 23.10.2025)

Reflecting on the insularity of the Viennese art scene and its limited international connections, the gallery owner gradually shifted the focus of the conversation from general structural problems to

specific institutional formats. This change led to a discussion about the future of international art fairs in Vienna, where the gallerist's position was same direct. He expressed doubts about the viability of having multiple competing fairs in a city with a limited market and a small collector base. In his opinion, Vienna could support only one strong fair, one that was closely tied to museum institutions and the public sector. In this setup, the involvement of international galleries would hold not just commercial value but also symbolic significance. It would provide a chance for galleries to enter museum collections and institutional contexts, which would add long-term value to their participation at the fair.

Until the meeting ended, the gallery remained empty, and the conversation stayed relaxed and focused. This discussion included no dramatic gestures or bold statements. Yet, it was through its calm criticism that it highlighted the everyday reality of the art market - not through official reports or public statements, but through the experience of someone within the system who observes its limitations from the inside.

In contemporary anthropology of art and art market, globalisation processes are increasingly described not as a uniform expansion of international ties but as a complex system of relationships between different scales: local, national and transnational. Despite the intensive circulation of artists, works and capital, as well as the art market's 'outside New York, even as New York remains the centre of this art world' (Rothenberg & Fine 2008, 34), artistic value continues to be formed in specific institutional, political and cultural contexts. A growing body of recent research demonstrates that the art market remains fragmented and largely dependent on local factors (Curioni & Velthuis 2015; Quemin 2015). Even within international art fairs, which are often perceived as symbols of global mobility, the processes of recognition, evaluation and sale of art are deeply rooted in local conditions. Consequently, the globalisation of the art world is not a universal reality but rather a heterogeneous process, filled with exceptions, asymmetries and local interpretations (Velthuis & Curioni 2015, 25–26).

Vienna, as a cultural centre with a rich artistic history, represents an important empirical field of analysis. Although the city is not considered a major centre of the global art market, its major number of cultural institutions, along with its increasing involvement in international cultural exchanges, makes Vienna a telling example of a regional art hub. At the same time, despite Vienna's significance as an artistic and institutional centre, there is still little anthropological research devoted to the Austrian art world.

Despite the noted trends toward the internationalisation of the Austrian art market, international artists still face several obstacles on these platforms. Against the backdrop of current sociopolitical processes, including the migration crisis (referred in official European political discourses as ‘2015 European migrant crisis’) and the war in Ukraine, international artists face additional challenges in selling their works. For instance, some Ukrainian artists note that ‘Austrians are simply afraid to buy art from Ukrainians because they do not know if it is legal at all’¹. This observation highlights the need for a deeper analysis of the complex interplay between global trends and local dynamics in the Viennese art market.

The subject of this study is the context of tense relations between the categories ‘local’ and ‘international’. They are not considered here as geographical designations or stable opposites, but as analytical counterparts – mutually constitutive concepts through which the legitimacy, value, and significance of art are articulated. For the Austrian art market, internationality is usually associated with the international origin of artists and works, participation in transnational art networks, and the use of globally recognisable aesthetic and discursive systems. At the same time, internationality in this context does not appear as a universal and self-sufficient quality of a work but arises in the process of local recognition, institutional inclusion, and social confirmation.

In the Austrian context, locality, in turn, is not exclusively reduced to the artist's national origin. In contrast, it is formed through practices of inclusion in the local art infrastructure, such as gallery networks, institutions, exhibition spaces and professional communities. Artists with different national or cultural backgrounds who live and work in Austria are often positioned and perceived as part of the local art scene. For example, an artist of Turkish origin whose professional activity and artistic career are based in Austria may be included in the local artistic context and presented by galleries as ‘Austrian’ art. In this sense, locality is not so much a question of origin as it is a result of spatial, institutional and professional ties. Moreover, locality is not a closed or isolated space but is constantly redefined through its relationship with international hierarchies, expectations and evaluation regimes.

The choice of art fairs as a key empirical object is justified as they are events in which this relationship between the local and the international becomes particularly visible. Art fairs function as temporary infrastructures where global aspirations and local limitations coexist in the same space, and artistic value is not discovered but produced through the interaction of gallery owners, institutions, the public, spatial organisation and discursive practices. Despite the apparent

¹ Office Ukraine Austria. n.d.

universality of the format, each fair is rooted in a specific local and historical context that influences the perception of art presented there, and, especially international art. In this sense, fairs are not a backdrop but active arenas in which internationalism takes shape and the local context sets the conditions for its possible realisation.

In recent years, additional sensitivity to international influences has manifested in the context of the current political climate. This is a clear example of how social and political anxieties find expression in art fairs, influencing how art is perceived and treated. Thus, art fairs function not only as economic platforms but also as infrastructure for cultural exchange, conflict, and recognition. This study aims to analyse these processes in the context of Viennese art fairs, focusing on how these spaces shape perceptions of the ‘international’ and the ‘local’.

For this research, gallery owners are not considered the central figures but rather mediators whose practices and statements reveal the categories of local and international. Their actions, strategies, and rhetoric allow us to trace how international art is integrated into the Viennese art context, confronts local expectations, anxieties, and institutional constraints, and, as a result, gains or fails to achieve symbolic and market value. Therefore, this study focuses not so much on individual actors as on the processes within which the ‘international’ and the ‘local’ mutually define each other and are given meaning in the context of the Viennese art fairs. This dialectic forms the basis of the central research question of the study: **How are local and international categories constructed and coexist at art fairs in Vienna?** In other words, the study addresses the purpose for which the notion of ‘internationality’ arises at art fairs in Vienna, how it is constructed and contrasted with the local system through institutional, spatial and discursive practices, and how it becomes meaningful and legitimate within the local art field.

This study is structured as a gradual transition from a theoretical understanding of the art market to an empirical analysis of the specific local context of Vienna. It combines conceptual and ethnographic approaches, allowing me to examine how the ideas of internationality and locality not only coexist but also mutually shape each other in the everyday practices of art fairs. The first part lays the conceptual and methodological foundations for the thesis. The introduction outlines the issues facing the contemporary art market, formulates key research questions, and introduces the main analytical categories through which the empirical material will be examined. The literature review places the study in the context of existing anthropological and interdisciplinary discussions about art fairs, artistic value and the mechanisms of its formation, revealing theoretical tensions between the global and local dimensions of art. The theoretical chapter develops these ideas by proposing a relational understanding of value, internationality, and locality as procedural

categories that arise in specific social, spatial, and institutional conditions. The methodological chapter describes the ethnographic nature of the research, the logic and structure of the work carried out in the field of art fairs, and the practical and ethical issues that arose during the research stage and contact with the professional Viennese art world.

The second part of the work moves on to an analysis of empirical material and focuses on the Viennese art fair landscape. First, it examines the broader context of the Austrian art market, its structural features and crises, and the cultural and political representations within which Vienna consistently positions itself as an open, internationally oriented cultural centre. This context sets an important normative framework: on the one hand, the city does not conceive of itself as a closed local space, but on the other hand, it faces real limitations and tensions in the process of collaboration with the international art field.

The focus then shifts to art fairs as key spaces where this contradiction is especially evident. In the relevant chapter, I analyse art fairs as social arenas where locality and internationalism not only coexist but are in complex and sometimes paradoxical relationships. On the one hand, fairs are forced to demonstrate international openness and compliance with global artistic standards in response to the political and cultural agenda of the city. However, it is precisely local infrastructure, institutional ties, public expectations, and market constraints that determine the forms and boundaries of this internationalism. I built the concluding empirical chapter around detailed case studies of two Viennese art fairs, *SPARK Art Fair Vienna* and *viennacontemporary*, conducted through observations of gallery practices, the spatial organisation of the fairs, and the discursive strategies of participants. These examples allow me to trace various ways of constructing internationality and its correlation with the local context, from more experimental and ambitious forms to institutionally stable and structured models. It becomes apparent how the artistic value and symbolic status of art are formed at the intersection of local conditions and global expectations.

Thus, art fairs appear as spaces of simultaneous integration and tension: here, the international and the local are mutually dependent, compete with each other, and at the same time are impossible without each other. Internationalism requires the local as the basis for its realisation, while locality is reinterpreted and legitimised through reference to international artistic and market benchmarks. It is this effect – the simultaneous cooperation and struggle between the two categories – that becomes the central object of analysis in the second part of the study.

This research contributes to the anthropology of art worlds and the study of contemporary art through a detailed examination of international art fairs as social and economic institutions. While most existing literature focuses either on the market mechanisms of art fairs or on the symbolic capital they generate, this study blends these perspectives, considering the interplay of local and global dynamics, professional networks, and the cultural strategies of galleries and artists in art fairs.

The thesis also contributes to anthropological debates on value, globality and art world infrastructures, demonstrating that internationality is not given but shaped by local institutional, political, and economic conditions. The study shows that the Austrian art market simultaneously aspires to global status and reproduces its own localness through tax regimes, limited audiences, infrastructural barriers and mediating practices. In this way, the work broadens anthropological discussions on the role of infrastructure, mediation, state-economic regimes, and the circulation of value in shaping regional and global art worlds.

This thesis is a part of economic anthropology and the anthropology of markets discussions, demonstrating that value in the art world is shaped not only through cultural practices and social relationships but also by infrastructural, tax, and political-economic regimes. The Austrian art market emerges as a locally embedded economic system, whose ‘internationality’ is limited by structural factors. Within this research, I reveal the roles of art dealers and gallerists as forms of mediation, whose agency is determined by risk distribution, regulatory regimes, and infrastructure, rather than exclusively by strategy or cultural capital. In this way, the work broadens economic–anthropological discussions on the nature of markets, forms of value circulation, and the politico-economic conditions of cultural production in the following ways.

Finally, the use of ethnographic methods – observation, interviews, and content analysis – enriches the methodological toolkit of art world anthropology. This study provides insights into the daily experiences of galleries and artists, the organizational dynamics of fairs, and the cultural, social and economic consequences of these events. Hence, this thesis contributes not only to the study of art markets but also to a broader anthropological understanding of contemporary cultural production, its evaluation and its circulation.

2. Methods and Ethics

2.1. Primary Data

a. Participant Observation: Conducted during art fairs, focused on booth layout, interactions, and audience

The focus of this master's thesis is the art fairs held in Vienna in 2025. My fieldwork was conducted from March to October 2025, with most observations and interactions taking place in the spring and autumn months, which aligned with the traditional timing of art fair events in Vienna. Spring typically features early editions of city art events, while the autumn season is richer in visual art events, as suggested by the term '*Kunstherbst*', which is frequently mentioned in the media. These events include numerous art fairs, spanning September and culminating in the Vienna Art Week in mid-November. Additionally, two leading and competing international art fairs occur in March (*SPARK Art Fair Vienna*) and September (*viennacontemporary*), which justifies the selection of this period for the field research.

During this period, I planned to attend 5 art fairs of contemporary art but in the end, I managed to attend only four of them. The initial idea was to target all events that branded themselves as '*international*'. However, as I immersed myself in the context through interviews, media analysis, mapping, and gradually getting to know the Viennese art scene, the focus of the research shifted to the two most significant and influential fairs: *SPARK Art Fair Vienna* and *viennacontemporary*. These fairs openly brand themselves as international ones and attract all the big names of Viennese gallery system.

The selection of these two art fairs followed the following criteria. First, these art fairs were most frequently mentioned by the respondents in the interviews as key art events in the Viennese art market ecosystem. The next argument concerns the history and positioning of these fairs. *viennacontemporary* is the oldest and most prestigious art fair in Vienna, having been held annually since 2005 and previously existed under different names (*VIENNAFAIR* from 2005 to 2015). *SPARK Art Fair Vienna* is the youngest art fair in Austria but having only 4 editions in total it managed to strengthen its influence and now striving to become the leading platform in the Viennese art market. Even though behind both art fairs we see one common person – Regner van den Heuvel – who believed that these two art fairs 'can coexist, giving impulse to the home market'², *SPARK Art Fair Vienna* is perceived as a dynamic competitor to the *viennacontemporary*.

The *Fair For Art Vienna* was initially considered the third art fair for this project, as it was often positioned by respondents in interviews as an alternative and, to a certain extent, as opposition to

² Bradley 2021, Artnet.

the two main fairs – *SPARK Art Fair Vienna* and *viennacontemporary*. During the interviews, several informants expressed critical opinions, noting that participation in the *Fair for Art* could negatively affect the reputation of a gallery. In addition, respondents pointed to the excessive length of the fair compared to other art fairs, what reduces its professional and institutional significance.

Despite initial expectations, the results of the fieldwork conducted at this fair demonstrated its limited relevance to the purposes of this study. First and foremost, *Fair for Art* cannot be characterised as an international art fair in the strict sense of the term, whereas internationality is the key object of analysis in this study. Moreover, the fair was neither positioned as international in leading media sources. Although one Spanish gallery participated in the 2025 edition of *Fair for Art*, which allowed me to have an interesting conversation with its representative, the presence of a single international participant is not sufficient for defining the fair as international. This requires a combination of factors, including the stable positioning of the event as such, diverse geography of participants, and institutional representation of the international art market. Due to the absence of these characteristics, a final decision was made not to include *Fair For Art* among the main cases analysed in this master's thesis.

In addition to these three events, I attended the very first edition of *Affordable Art Fair* in Vienna. This format has been implemented in various countries and cities, offering a more ‘accessible’ segment of art and targeting different price ranges and audiences in the process. However, as interviews and observations have demonstrated, local gallery owners do not perceive it as a significant platform for presenting valuable art projects to the public. Another art fair, *ART VIENNA International art fair* was also planned as a subject of research, as it traditionally occupies a significant position in the Viennese art calendar. However, the edition scheduled for September 2025 was cancelled for reasons that have not been made public, and the next edition was postponed to 2026 which exceeded the time-scale of the thesis. However, *ART VIENNA International art fair*, *Affordable Art Fair* and *Fair For Art Vienna* are not considered as separate case studies, they are mentioned in the study in the context of a general overview of the Viennese art scene.

As a result of the conducted field research, I gathered a substantial collection of empirical material, which then served as the basis for the analytical component of the research and the creation of a research database. In the course of my work, I had the opportunity to engage in discourse with a diverse array of representatives from the art world, including art managers and gallery owners present at art fairs in Vienna. The respondents included both Austrian gallery owners and representatives from international galleries across various countries, including Switzerland, Turkey, the United Kingdom, Spain, Italy and others. In particular, I focused attention on how the

public reacts to various forms of contemporary art, what are the expectations of local audiences regarding international artistic practices, what differences characterise the Austrian public compared to audiences in other countries.

In addition to conducting interviews, I made observations during visits to fairs, focusing on the atmosphere, spatial organisation, and visual design of stands. Furthermore, I conducted an analysis of press materials and social media posts, focusing on media coverage and reactions on art fairs. I paid special attention on the location of the stands and their ability to attract visitors.

After the fairs concluded, the study was enhanced by analysing media materials, official reports, and press releases published in the aftermath of the events. I worked with media materials covering issues of institutional struggle and criticism, the art market crisis, and providing analytical commentary on these topics. It allowed me to compare the declared '*internationality*' of the fairs and the actual structure of their participants, thereby facilitating an understanding of how the concept of internationality is constructed in the practice of organising art fairs. A quantitative and statistical analysis was conducted to ascertain the composition of the participants, including the distribution of stands between Austrian and international galleries, as well as an assessment of the diversity and geography of the participants' origins. The obtained data constituted an important element of the empirical basis of the study, allowing me to study the manifestation of the categories '*local*' and '*international*' in the institutional structures of the contemporary art market in Vienna.

b. Qualitative Interviews

The primary source of empirical data for this study was qualitative interviews conducted during fieldwork. Most of the interviews and conversations were conducted in informal settings, particularly at art fairs. In addition, a series of semi-structured formal interviews were conducted, each lasting an average of 50–55 minutes and recorded for following transcription.

It is important to note that the field research itself, as well as the process of establishing contacts and finding respondents for interviews, proved to be much more difficult than expected. My main respondents were Viennese gallery owners who participate in art fairs, as they are one of the main actors at such events. In practice, however, the research process was hampered by unexpected difficulties, primarily related to the significant difficulties in establishing contact with the relevant interlocutors for organizing interviews. The interview phase was scheduled from July to October 2025, during which only a limited number of interviews were conducted. I sent requests via email and attempted to contact potential participants through personal recommendations. However, in most cases, these requests were unanswered or rejected by the courts. In certain instances, respondents requested reimbursement for participating in the interview, which might

have raised concerns regarding the independence of the research and academic validity. Consequently, these options were excluded from the consideration from the very beginning.

Overall, it became evident that the Viennese art scene, and by extension the Austrian art scene, is rather closed and challenging for external researchers to access it. Despite the warning from some Viennese gallerists with whom I managed to set the interviews, such impenetrability was somewhat unexpected, given the willingness of gallerists to communicate at art fairs themselves. In spite of the challenges encountered, approximately 20 qualitative interviews were successfully conducted, predominantly informally.

Qualitative interviews enabled the identification of new research areas, including the refinement of the focus and the development of a central research question centred on the concept of ‘*internationality*’ within the Viennese art scene. Additionally, the investigation uncovered the complex adaptation strategies employed by galleries in response to ongoing market crises. Throughout the interviews, a range of topics were explored, such as weaknesses of the local art market, the participation of galleries in art fairs, their significance and necessity for the Austrian art scene, issues concerning state subsidies and grants, the impact of nationality on a participant's success or failure at a fair, and the true meaning of being international art in the Austrian context.

2.2. Secondary research

a. Socio–Economic Analysis: Academic Literature and Market Reports

One key area of research became the socio–economic analysis of the art market, including the work with academic sources and industry reports. This part of the research aimed to identify the current trends, challenges, and changes in the international and Austrian art contexts.

As part of my desk research, I reviewed academic papers on various aspects of the art market. These studies cover a wide range of topics, from the mechanisms of art value formation and the institutional role of galleries to issues of unequal access, the dynamics of globalisation, and the consequences of the COVID–19 pandemic on the art market. Another important topic was the so–called ‘art market crisis,’ which rapidly intensified in the post–COVID period and had an impact at both the global and local levels.

In addition to the academic literature, I analysed key industry reports. Among them, The Art Market Report 2025, is a global study of the state of the world art market, prepared with the support of Art Basel and UBS, the Kreativwirtschaftsbericht Österreich 2024 and Kreativwirtschaftsbericht Österreich 2025, provide a detailed overview of the state of the creative economy in Austria, including data on the art sector.

According to The Art Market Report 2025, 2024 was a year of serious challenges for the market, with total sales falling by 12% (Arts Economics 2025, 12). Notably, over the past two decades, the market has not shown sustained growth, and in 2024, there was a particularly sharp decline in the high-end segment of the market, which includes the most expensive and prestigious art (Arts Economics 2024, 153). The distinction between the primary and secondary markets also allows us to observe internal shifts. In the secondary market, sales fell by 29%, with 25% of this decline attributable to works valued at less than \$10 million (Arts Economics 2025, 154). The primary market saw an overall 6% decline in sales. However, there are also significant differences within the segment: galleries with a turnover of more than \$10 million saw a decline of 9%, while small galleries with revenues below \$250,000 saw a 17% increase in sales (Arts Economics 2025, 17). Data from Austrian reports confirm that the effects of the crisis are also noticeable at the local level. In 2024 and 2025, the Kreativwirtschaftsbericht Österreich reports highlighted a decline in investment activity in the visual arts sector, increased competition, and instability in the income of small galleries (Kreativwirtschaft Austria der Wirtschaftskammer Österreich 2025, 7).

b. Media Analysis

The study of media space and coverage of art events constitutes a significant component of this research, as the media sphere in the domain of culture and art fulfils several key functions. First, the media functions as an intermediary of public opinion, shaping and reflecting the assessment of events, exhibitions, and fairs. Second, the role of the media as a critical actor cannot be overstated: its capacity to approve or criticise an event, influence perception, and in certain instances, potentially compromise the reputation of organisers or participants can ultimately result in the cancellation of an event. Third, from the standpoint of anthropology of evaluation and value-making, the media is becoming a potent instrument for legitimising or delegitimising participants in the art market.

In this study, media space is analysed through the following:

- monitoring press releases, media partnerships and fair sponsorships,
- analysing the content of specialised art publications: interviews with gallery owners, articles about fairs and the market, publications about international participation,
- research on how the media creates and represents the category of ‘internationality’ of the fair (e.g. the share of international galleries, mentions in English-language media, advertising campaigns).

In the context of the Austrian art market, it is important to understand that the largest art publications play the role of not only information portals but also institutional actors involved in the formation of cultural capital and the symbolic capital of galleries and dealers. There are also editions which are involved in branding art fairs such as, *EIKON Magazine*, which not just covers art fairs in its articles but also participates in media partnerships with art fairs in Austria and other countries. I analysed articles from prominent art sources such as *Arterritory* and *Artsy*, focusing on Vienna, its art exhibitions and the Viennese art market. Additionally, I examined materials from *PARNASS*, one of Austria's leading art publications. *PARNASS* is particularly relevant because it sponsors nearly all major contemporary art exhibitions in the country, making its portrayal and characterisation of events especially influential in the field. Considering the media's dual role as both sponsor and partner of these events, it is important to evaluate how this involvement influences the perception of an art fair as 'international', 'significant,' or 'elite'. For example, the press release for the *viennacontemporary* art fair lists numerous partner publications and media brands, highlighting a deliberate effort to enhance the fair's international appeal and legitimacy³.

I also analysed articles from more general Austrian media outlets, such as *Der Standard*, *Kurier* and *Die Presse*. These publications do not specialise exclusively in art but they contain valuable material on cultural policy, exhibition activities and public reactions to events in the art world. As a prominent example, *Die Presse* was that magazine, which published an article criticising *SPARK Art Fair Vienna* and leading to a wide resonance in 2023, forcing the management to postpone the edition to the next year.

In addition to analysing local Austrian media, I studied sources devoted to broader European trends in the development of the art market. I checked publications in *The Art Newspaper*, which highlights the key issues, challenges, and conflicts currently facing the European art market. These materials allowed me to build a broader context and compare local observations with global dynamics, such as changing collecting patterns, the politicisation of exhibition activities, growing international competition, and changes in the system of institutional support for the arts in the region. Furthermore, the study analysed official websites directly related to the fairs, including archives, participant lists, event programmes, and press releases. I went through the social media accounts of exhibitions and galleries, as well as visual materials, and screenshots of key events, announcements, and publications collected and saved for analysis.

Therefore, media space functions not only as a backdrop but also as an active field for the formation of values, reputations, and networks of legitimacy in the art market. The study of this

³ viennacontemporary 2025, Press information.

aspect helped me answering the following questions: How is the perception of an international fair formed? Why are some fairs perceived as more prestigious? What roles do media partnerships and media representation play in value creation?

c. State cultural policy and the funding of the arts sector

The analysis of this block facilitated the comprehension of how state strategies and programs influence the formation and perception of the Austrian art market, in addition to determining the framework for the country's participation in international cultural processes. I studied the main political and strategic documents that define the development of the cultural sphere in Austria. During the research, I studied the document '*The International Cultural Relations*' (ger. *Auslandskulturkonzept*), published by the Federal Ministry for European and International Affairs of Austria (BMEIA). The text delineates the fundamental domains of international cultural policy, encompassing intercultural dialogue, digital humanism, and global networking of artists and scientists. This document is indicative of Austria's ambition to enhance its cultural presence on the global stage, utilising art as a means of soft power and diplomatic engagement.

Another important source is the *Kulturenstrategie 2030*, which defines the long-term goals of the country's cultural policy. Austria has adopted the position of an open international hub, with culture recognised as a fundamental component of sustainable development, social cohesion, and international cooperation. This strategic document underscores the primacy of internationalism and cultural exchange, a notion that resonates directly with the concerns addressed in my research, particularly the way the concept of '*internationalism*' is operationalised in art fairs.

In addition to political strategies, this study focused on government programs for financing and subsidising the art sector, including initiatives by the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Labor and Economy. I researched grants and subsidies designed to facilitate the participation of galleries and artists in international contemporary art fairs (*Auslandsmeseförderung* (BMEIA)). An analysis of this program reveals a certain dissonance between the rhetoric of cultural internationalisation and the practical mechanisms for its implementation. On the one hand, Austria is engaged in a concerted effort to promote its image as an international cultural centre; on the other hand, a significant proportion of the funding is allocated to the promotion of Austrian galleries and artists outside the country, rather than to the development of domestic international platforms such as the Vienna art fairs.

Furthermore, an analysis was conducted of reports and documents pertaining to the art market and materials related to state support for cultural institutions and creative industries. The analysis of these sources enabled the delineation of the way state policy and the distribution of subsidies

influence the structure and dynamics of the local art field, thereby establishing a distinct correlation between the national and international levels of contemporary art representation.

2.3. Ethics

The ethical component is integral to any anthropological and sociocultural research, particularly in instances involving interaction with professional communities and expert fields that possess their own systems of norms, rules, and reputational risks. The present research, grounded in field research conducted within Vienna's art scene, required careful attention to matters related to confidentiality, voluntary participation, data representation, and the interpretation of the accumulated material.

I had to be careful not to consider the evaluations, tastes, or strategic actions of the participants as 'natural' or 'individual' phenomena. Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1989) pointed out that even evaluative judgements or forms of art presentation are expressions of power and struggles for recognition. This helps to capture those forms of symbolic power and recognition that determine the legitimacy of artistic practices and the actors within the field itself (Bourdieu 1989, 26). It avoids reducing art to simply 'taste' or 'market' and instead reveals the more complex structure underlying its evaluation and perception. In practice, this involves a choice of presentation language, booth settings, the status of fairs, and the institutional ties of the participants. These carriers of symbolic meaning must be interpreted rather than fixed in place. Therefore, the interview and observation methods in this study required not only adherence to formal ethical norms but also sensitive and nuanced engagement with the contexts in which symbolic power, language, and representation are vital. With these ethical and methodological guidelines in mind, this study adopted the following practices:

- Allowing participants the opportunity for confidentiality and coordination of quotations
- Open communication of the research role and aims
- Avoiding covert surveillance and respecting the boundaries of professional spaces
- Constant reflexivity of the research position and its potential impacts.

Such a strategy enabled the construction of research that is sensitive to the symbolic and social structure of the artistic world, thereby avoiding the involuntary distortion of participants' positions.

a. Voluntary participation and informed consent

It is imperative to note that all interviews, both formal and informal, were conducted strictly on a voluntary basis. The potential respondents were informed that the study was of an academic nature and non-commercial in scope and that they were permitted to withdraw from participation at any

time without needing to provide an explanation. In the case of formal semi-structured interviews, participants provided both verbal and written consent for audio recording (consent form) and permission to quote and use the collected data exclusively for academic research.

An important ethical issue that arose was the realisation that not everyone in the art world, especially those involved in gallery ownership and dealing, was open to discussing the internal logic of their professional practice. Some respondents were concerned about the potential impact on their reputation. Therefore, during the interviews, it was crucial to acknowledge that the participants – art dealers, galleries, and institutional representatives – operated in a highly competitive environment where status, reputation, and language were vital. Even seemingly neutral questions may be perceived as evaluations or interpretations of a participant's standing. It was important to be aware of how participants perceived their roles and the meanings they assigned to terms such as ‘international’, ‘valuable’, ‘relevant’, or ‘local’. These concepts are not universal; they are shaped within specific professional, cultural, and ideological contexts, making it essential not to impose external evaluations or categorical frameworks that do not align with the actors' perceptions. In this context, the anonymity of the respondents was preserved. The names, galleries, and specific institutions of the respondents are not disclosed.

b. Confidentiality and data storage

All audio recordings of the interviews, field notes, and correspondence were stored in encrypted form and were inaccessible to third parties. A decontextualisation procedure was used during data processing. This procedure involved separating personal and identifying details from the analytical fragments contained within the research corpus. The quotations and fragments of statements presented in this thesis have been reinterpreted in a generalised form. This approach enabled the preservation of semantic accuracy while protecting participants' personal data.

c. Ethical challenges in the field and the boundaries of the research position

The ethical framework guiding this study extends beyond mere compliance with formal norms such as voluntariness, informed consent, and confidentiality. It is distinguished by a reflexive understanding of the cultural and symbolic structures that shape art. Conducting ethnographic research at art fairs, galleries, informal meetings and professional events necessitates respect for ethical boundaries. As noted by Becker (1982) and Flick (2009), a researcher cannot remain ‘invisible’; their presence invariably influences the field, particularly in settings where symbolic forms of recognition and exclusion manifest through gestures, bodily codes, and spaces of access (Flick 2009, 52–53). Therefore, it is crucial to respect implicit boundaries, refrain from intruding

into private discussions, be transparent about one's role, and minimise any distortion of communication dynamics.

Operating within an artistic environment, where social relations are intricately linked to economic and reputational factors, raises questions about the limits of inclusive observation. My position as a researcher external to this community, yet present at fairs, engaging in discussions, and observing communication within the professional environment, required constant reflection. I was aware that any interaction with respondents could be perceived as potentially instrumental in a context where every contact might have commercial or symbolic significance. Thus, in every interaction, I aimed to minimise the elements of pressure or expectation, emphasising the research distance and academic context of the engagement.

In several instances, gallery representatives expressed a desire for commercial compensation for participating in the interviews. This challenges both the ethical purity of the data and the principle of equal access to data. Consequently, I rejected the practice of paid interviews from the outset, as this form of interaction could distort the motivation behind responses and compromise the academic independence of the research.

d. Reflexivity of the researcher position

Ethical considerations also extend to my role in the research and the depth of my engagement with Vienna's local art scene. As I progressed in my work, I became increasingly conscious of my dual position as a researcher examining the dynamics of internationalism and the art market and as a participant in cultural events, physically present with the respondents. This dual role required careful consideration of my involvement in the study. I noticed how my presence could shape the behaviour of informants and how subjective impressions and aesthetic judgments could influence the analytical conclusions. This self-reflection became part of a broader methodological approach in which the researcher consciously acknowledges their position within the field.

My role as a researcher frequently shifted from observer to interlocutor, from a silent participant taking notes to someone who was perceived as a potential buyer. These roles had to be managed in real time, often necessitating a pause in informal dialogue if collectors or staff approached the booth. While navigating the fairs, I felt an uneasy sense of belonging to an 'alien' environment. I felt like an outsider when I mentioned that I was conducting art research. There, everyone seemed to know each other, stayed connected, and represented one another. They discussed art and deals, but as a researcher, I felt out of my depth in that conversation. Paradoxically, I can honestly say that almost all the gallerists I spoke with were open and friendly. They showed a keen interest in my topic, especially when I mentioned my education and how I came to the research topic. I

addressed an important topic, as many people have acknowledged. Ultimately, the result is a field archive rich in data diversity, but also marked by situationality.

This dual position has both advantages and limitations. Attending fairs helped me to observe the dynamics of interaction among participants, audience reactions, and gallery presentation practices in real time, which was a significant advantage of this study. However, the limitations included restricted access to confidential information and the respondents' complete openness, as well as the ongoing necessity to reflect on my influence in the field.

Based on the fieldwork, I am left with the hypothesis that although art fairs are positioned as open to new audiences, in practice, they are mainly oriented towards those who are already '*inside*' the art scene (Curioni *et al.* 2015, 75). Other researchers have also reflected on this; for example, Garutti (2014) considers fairs as rituals that form symbolic models of the social world. In this context, Anand and Watson (2004) emphasise that such rituals establish a boundary between 'who is an insider from who is not, providing a shared understanding of the social reality when the ritual is enacted' (Anand & Watson 2004, 62). I am convinced that, as Plattner (1998) described, if you want something from the art world, you must give something in return: connection, work, or knowledge.

e. Ethical principles of publication and data representation

During the writing phase, I encountered the question regarding the representation of collected material. Given the relatively compact nature of Vienna's art community, even anonymised quotations could, in theory, facilitate the identification of individual participants. Consequently, only those fragments of interviews that could not lead to the disclosure of identities were retained in the final text. The analysis is based on generalised patterns and discursive strategies rather than on the individual characteristics of the respondents.

In accordance with academic standards, all data sources and contexts of their acquisition were documented without publishing any confidential information. The decision was made to refrain from publishing photographs or videos that would reveal the respondents' identities, even in instances where they were captured in public.

f. Ethical conclusions

The ethical section of this study is based on the principles of respect, voluntariness, anonymity, and reflexivity, as follows: the acceptance of these principles was instrumental in preserving the trust of informants, ensuring the reliability of the data, and concurrently minimising potential risks for both the participants and the researcher herself. The ethical approach adopted in this study encompasses not only procedural aspects but also an understanding of power, responsibility, and

representation in the anthropological field of art, where the boundaries between research, participation, and criticism are constantly traversed.

2.4. Limitations of the study and researcher positioning

It is necessary to acknowledge the methodological and contextual limitations inherent in field research, particularly within closed professional communities, when interpreting data. In the context of the Viennese art scene, these limitations are particularly pronounced. They encompass aspects such as access to respondents, the nature and quantity of material collected, and the specific social and cultural characteristics of the environment being studied.

a. Limitations on access, time, and data representativeness

Field research at art fairs reveals several practical and epistemological issues. Fairs are dynamic, visually rich, and commercially sensitive events. Dealers often perform several tasks simultaneously, such as serving customers, setting up exhibitions, and interacting with representatives of institutional institutions. Therefore, flexibility, strategic discretion, and constant presence are required to gain access. This became one of the difficulties in conducting the research: it was not possible to conduct informal interviews with some of the gallery owners because of the constant commotion around their booths. This was especially problematic at the *Affordable Art Fair*, as the fair itself offered works in a low-price segment, which made the event more accessible and attractive to a wider range of buyers than at other fairs. The days chosen for the study were also important. There were more opportunities to talk to art dealers on the first day of the exhibition than on the following weekend. However, in my case, as *the Affordable Art Fair* launched on Saturday, avoiding fieldwork on weekends was not possible.

Another important constraint of this study was the limited number of participants who agreed to be interviewed. Despite active attempts to establish contacts via email, personal recommendations, and observations at trade fairs, I conducted mostly informal qualitative interviews. Formal and semi-structured interviews were conducted in smaller numbers but they provided in-depth and detailed information. Thus, public sources (e.g. press releases, media partnerships, and social networks) became an important tool for supplementing limited interviews. The combination of on-site observations, media space analysis, and official documents made it possible to balance the limitations of access to respondents and create a more comprehensive picture of the Viennese art scene.

These limitations imply that the data collected cannot be claimed to be fully representative of the Viennese art ecosystem. Instead, they reflect a private, concentrated cross-section of professional

practices and value orientations, allowing for an analysis of the key mechanisms of internationalisation, legitimisation, and evaluation.

b. Reflectiveness and transparency of methodology

It is vital to be aware of one's limitations and position as a researcher. This is part of a reflective approach that minimises methodological and interpretative errors. All observations and interviews were recorded with the need for data anonymisation in mind and all analytical conclusions were based on a comparison of several sources of information, including documents, media coverage, and quantitative indicators of participation in fairs.

Therefore, the limitations imposed by access restrictions and the specific characteristics of the field do not detract from the study's significance; rather, they facilitate a more precise localisation of results and their interpretation within the context of a specific professional environment. The methodological approach is characterised by its commitment to the key principles of reflectiveness, transparency, and ethical prudence, which serve to ensure reliability and validity.

3. Literature Review

The study of the art world and its components is a complex field of research at the intersection of disciplines such as art history, sociology, anthropology, economics and business, globalisation, and political science. Although the meaning of ‘art’ as we understand it today is relatively new (Taylor 2023, 3), it fits into social, cultural, and symbolic frameworks, including religious and philosophical systems (Taylor 2023, 3). These frameworks play a significant role in shaping the evaluation and recognition processes. This chapter aims to contextualise the present research within the broader academic approaches to studying the art world and its participants, while also identifying gaps that this thesis seeks to fill in. Moreover, the primary objective of this section is to shape the space for further discussion on how internationality is created, given meaning and evaluated through art fairs in Vienna, and how it creates the dialectic system with the local component.

During my preliminary research, I reviewed publications dedicated to the study of the art world and its actors as well as publications examining the global art market from economic, political, and sociological perspectives. I encountered a substantial body of literature pertaining to the attribution, appropriation, and decolonisation of art objects in addition to cultural heritage studies (see, for example, Smiers 2003). However, such a large and significant field, its institutions, and its actors ‘have attracted surprisingly little attention as “field site” ’ (Ciotti & Zitzewitz 2022, 4), with most existing studies being of a sociological nature (see Rojas & De La Torre, Rothenberg & Fine, etc.). This gap especially within the anthropological research has often been highlighted as space for further research (Plattner 2003, Morel 2014).

Throughout the chapter I delve deeper into the existing academic literature on art fairs, defining them, framing the discussions around their significance for the art world, and for the value creation of an art piece. After this, I turn to the studies on globalisation and internalisation to see how the definition of international is shaped in the case of art fairs and the extent of the influence of globalisation on the art world. Then, I continue with the research examining the role of gallerists in creating and sustaining the ‘*international paradox*’, as they become my main interlocutors and a major part of the collected ethnographic data reflects their opinions and criticism on the current art system in Austria. I wrap up with the discussion on the existing literature on Vienna.

Art fairs at the art market: merely a validation stage?

Art fairs are complex arenas in which the commercial, institutional and social values of artworks interact and reinforce each other. These organisations play a critical role in shaping the contemporary art ecosystem, determining the legitimacy of artists and galleries, and ensuring

transparency within the market and its regulatory framework, benefits that are recognised by both participants and researchers in the field. I found the general information on them in introductory sociological or economic textbooks examining the art world. Although these works serve more like introductory information, they serve as a main starting point of the discussion and constitute a significant resource to acquire knowledge about various aspects of the art world.

A notable example is Taylor's *Art Business* (2023), which includes a chapter providing a comprehensive overview and the historical account of art fairs. According to Taylor, art fairs represent the oldest form of trade (Taylor 2023, 6), which evolved from medieval trade fairs, passed through French salons, and derived from the biennale to a separate format, thereby emphasising the commercial component (Taylor 2023, 111–112). Slightly different view on the emergence of art fairs can be found in Thompson's chapter *Art Fairs: The Market as Medium* (Thompson 2011), where he asserts that art fairs have emerged as the predominant venues for the acquisition and disposition of works of high art as a response to the dominant positions of major auction houses such as Christie's and Sotheby's in the art market. He highlighted that dealers employ branded and extensively promoted fairs as strategic countermeasures. He sees art fairs as 'value tournaments' that bring together key actors within the industry, including dealers, collectors, curators, and artists (Thompson 2011, 59). Consequently, the market evolved into a significant ecosystem.

Researcher Quemin (2013) notes that participation in art fairs is not only one of the key sources of income for galleries, but also a necessary condition for expanding artists' access to an international audience. With the rapid growth in the number of art fairs, it is becoming difficult to claim that a gallery truly supports contemporary art if it does not provide its artists with opportunities to interact with the global art market (Quemin 2013, 2–6). Petterson (2014) goes further and introduces art fairs as a significant component of the contemporary art market that validates and sets the price for works of art. For him global contemporary art market is an international ecosystem that comprises national, regional, and local submarkets. In this context, the verification of contemporary artworks is contingent on current and future success rather than on a long historical reputation, in contrast to the paradigm observed in classical art (Petterson 2014, 70–71). Same concept we can find at Rodner and Thomson's (2013), named by them as 'art machine', when artists previously dependent on the long-standing reputation of historical figures find themselves reliant on a complex network of validation sources, including gallery owners, collectors, curators, and art fairs. The value formation process is characterised by a series of distinct stages, beginning with the completion of academic studies at art schools and the establishment of a network of professional contacts. This is followed by the presentation of artistic work in debut exhibitions,

participation in art fairs and exposure to museum collections (Petterson 2014, 72–73). He refers to art fairs as a formation phase – a *stage of institutional recognition* – provided after the successful completion of the solo validation stage through exhibitions and art education (Petterson 2014, 74). This approach illustrates how commercial activity and institutional recognition are interrelated and how the success of a gallery depends on its ability to ‘*place*’ the artist and their work in a museum context (Petterson 2014, 73–74).

It could be a fast assumption that art fairs represent only institutional validation, excluding market validation. Thompson focuses on another aspect, saying that art fairs can be used to manage and even undermine price agreements in the art market (Thompson 2011, 68–69). He explains that when an artwork by a popular artist is sold at auction for a significantly higher price than in a gallery, the gallerist faces a dilemma. To resolve this issue, they may opt to transfer a new product to another distributor for sale at a major trade fair at a significantly higher price. This strategy enables artists to capitalise on increased market value without compromising relationships with collectors on the official waiting list or causing sharp increase in prices in the primary gallery (Thompson 2011, 69). In this way, an art fair also becomes a parallel market space in which one can bypass strict pricing rules and gallery queues to assess an artist's work at its true market value.

In general, most studies devoted to art fairs agree that they are key arenas for the formation, validation and circulation of the value of artworks. In these works, art fairs are viewed primarily as institutional and market spaces in which the status of artists, the legitimacy of galleries, and the economic value of works are determined. This approach seems reasonable and analytically productive and is not questioned in the thesis. However, focusing exclusively on art fairs as centres of validation and pricing is insufficient to understand the full complexity of the processes taking place in these spaces.

In addition to their function of endowing works of art with symbolic and economic value, art fairs accumulate and reflect a wide range of other factors, including changing aesthetic tastes, geopolitical circumstances, cultural and national hierarchies, local institutional contexts other ‘fluid’ elements (Rodner & Thomson 2013). This is particularly evident in the case of the Viennese art fairs, which are arenas of intense interaction and contradiction between international ambitions and locally rooted artistic, institutional, and cultural orders. In this sense, art fairs in Vienna function not only as spaces for the consolidation of value, but also as places of symbolic struggle, where global and local logics intersect and clash.

The academic piece of Curioni *et al.* (2015) is important to conceptualise art fairs as infrastructures that ‘*make visible*’ the invisible networks of interactions between artists, galleries, and institutions,

thereby transforming the market into a performative space of visibility and legitimacy. Art fairs have been shown as ‘rituals that provide symbolic models of the social world’ (Curioni *et al.* 2015, 75). They set out to facilitate the structuring of flows of attention, value, and recognition within the global art system, rendering it more transparent for market participants (Curioni *et al.* 2015). In this context, art fairs function not only as trading platforms, but also as centres for the formation of the meaning and legitimacy of works of art. These ideas are especially important for the discussions on Viennese art fairs, becoming the spaces with the clear structure reflecting local order colliding with international aspirations. It highlights the argument of this paper that rather than perceiving fairs exclusively as commercial events, this study interprets them as performative spaces – social arenas in which symbolic and economic values are jointly created.

Economic Anthropology

Muniesa, Millo and Callon (2007, 2) in their joint work *Market Devices* highlight that market are not just formed by economic exchanges but through various tools and practices – market devices. These devices, including the valuation standards, rates, catalogues and institutional practices, structure the collaboration among market players, construct trust and legitimise goods and services (Muniesa, Millo и Callon 2007, 2-5). We can consider art fairs as an example of such devices: they set the rules of art evaluation, form prices, assure the interaction among artists, gallerist and collectors therefore actively constructing the market.

Cameron (2019, 15) adds to this perspective, showing that consumption experience and accumulation of knowledge play a key role in the formation of ‘appreciation capital’. According to the model of ‘rational addiction’, current consumption depends on the past experience and future expectations: the more a person learns about art and, for instance, attends art fairs, the more this person understands and appreciates artworks, so the more he is ready to become a part of an art market and purchases art (Cameron 2019, 16). In the context of art fairs, this means that the regular participation of collectors and curators enhances the quality of evaluation, strengthens the legitimization effect, and increases the value of the fair itself as an institution in the global art field.

This aspect is particularly important for this paper, as the absence of a *Rational Addiction mechanism* (Cameron 2019, 15-16) in local fairs, manifests itself in a lack of preparation and experience among the audience. This, as explained by my interlocutors, is why some fairs are not fully international and experience limited participation from participants and collectors.

Petterson named another phase of the validation – expansion phase which consists of market validation. Unlike institutional recognition, market-based validation assesses an artwork’s quality and success through measurable auction prices, rather than the gradual build-up of cultural

significance. However, in many Western art markets, cultural and economic values often intersect closely (Pettersen 2014, 74). Braathen *et al.* (2007) also mentioned this thesis. They underscore the notion that aesthetic value and economic value are becoming increasingly intertwined, giving the quote of ‘the head of contemporary art at Sotheby's, Tobias Meyer: The best art is the most expensive because the market is so smart’ (Braathen *et al.* 2007, 5). Therefore, it is also important to touch upon the topic of price making, where the economic categories meet social and cultural structures. Velthuis also devoted a significant amount of his work to pricing in the art market. He emphasises that pricing is a multi-layered process. Analysing the functioning of the art market through the lens of economic theory reveals that it is based on the same principles as other sectors of the economy: rationality, self-interest, and the desire to maximise utility (Velthuis 2003, 183). Here, art loses its uniqueness category and its prices reflect cultural values. However, he concludes that prices are not ‘only about money’:

By listening to the way art dealers talk when they deal with prices and by observing what they do when they market art, I found that prices tell rich stories about the caring role dealers want to enact, about the identity of collectors, about the status of artists, and the artistic value of art (Velthuis 2003, 206–207).

International vs Local: Globalisation in the Art World

The concept of internationalism in the contemporary art world occupies a central place in discussions about cultural globalisation, as it has become a key symbolic resource that determines the prestige, legitimacy and market value of art. Researchers in the global art market have repeatedly emphasised the existence of hierarchies of recognition based on the origins of artists and institutions (Bydler 2004; Quemin & van Hest 2014). For example, Ciotti (2022) says that Art Basel, one of the most established and distinguished institutions in the art validation system, can be perceived as a key node in the global hierarchy of values. Simultaneously, the concept of *globality* in contemporary art is far from uniform. As Bydler (2004) observes, the globalisation of the art world does not constitute a linear process of integration; rather, it is a network of interconnected centres where internationalism is not so much a fact as an ideal form of capital. Thus, despite the spread of exhibitions and biennials around the world, the art market remains Western-centric, and the ‘deterritorialisation’ of art often turns out to be mere rhetoric concealing the uneven distribution of cultural capital (Bydler 2004; Belting 2009).

In their joint work, Velthuis and Baia Curioni (2015) identify three levels of understanding of the globalisation of the art market: (1) the institutional spread of infrastructure that allows the market to function internationally; (2) cross-border sales connecting local artists and collectors from other countries; and (3) the integration of local markets into a single global system (Velthuis & Baia

Curioni 2015, 3–4). The authors question the idea of a ‘global’ art market, noting that in practice, it remains deeply stratified.

Quemin (2013, 2015) demonstrated through consistent research that the globalisation of the art world has not destroyed, but rather reinforced, geographical and national hierarchies of recognition. Empirical research conducted by the author reveals that even the most prominent international art fairs exhibit a concentration of participants from ‘leading art markets’, namely, the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Switzerland, and Italy. For instance, at the 2008 Art Basel fair, only 10% of galleries were Swiss, while 23% represented the United States, 17% represented Germany, and 10% represented the United Kingdom (Quemin 2013, 5). This distribution demonstrates that internationalism functions as symbolic capital, conferring prestige on the event, but failing to eliminate cultural and market asymmetries. However, as Ciotti (2022) observes it is important to note that the ‘Euro-American art world’ is a heterogeneous concept. Not all institutions in this sphere play the same role, even within the same country or city. Consequently, the global hierarchy of value is not established on clearly delineated geographical levels – ‘country-city-institution’ – but rather constitutes a network of ‘geopolitical fragments’ (Ciotti 2022, 224).

In other studies, Quemin and van Hest (2015) demonstrated that nationality and territorial origin continue to play important roles in shaping artists ‘success and reputation. This is also reflected when it comes to the perception of their biographies and backgrounds. In her essay ‘*Glocalization and analytical paths towards inclusive contemporary art*, Abazine (2017) examines the situation of Iranian artist Vouariya Ariya, who was born in Iran but is pursuing a creative career in Austria (Abazine 2017). She noted that the emphasis on the artist's biography varies depending on the context. In Austria, her Iranian origin is emphasised, while in Arab countries, attention is shifting to her place of residence – Europe and Austria. The author concludes that conformity to stereotypes or their violation can facilitate the integration of the artist's works into the local art market (Abazine 2017, 11). Internationality functions as a structural principle, enabling the market to reproduce existing hierarchies despite the rhetoric of globalism promising equal access.

Rodner and Thomson's (2013) art machine model complements this understanding by highlighting that international art fairs offer a ‘high level of symbolic validation’ for participants, whereas local fairs provide only a limited level of recognition (Rodner and Thomson 2013, 11). Consequently, participation in international events has evolved into an economic strategy and a form of cultural capital, thereby facilitating inclusion in the global scene. Yogev and Grund also supported this idea, pointing out that the type of art prevailing at art fairs typically communicates with an international rather than a local language. (Yogev & Grund 2012, 28).

The important contribution to the importance of the notion of ‘international’ in art fairs’ system became the work on international art fairs in China, written by Vecco, Chang, and Zanola (2021). They offer a new understanding of art fairs, considering them not only as commercial venues, but also as platforms for knowledge exchange, professional interaction, and the exercise of soft power (Vecco *et al.* 2021, 326). They conceptualise fairs through the concept of ‘ephemeral clusters and interlocal learning spaces’ that bring together participants from disparate countries and engender opportunities for the integration of local and global knowledge (Vecco *et al.* 2021, 327). Methodologically, this study employs a two-dimensional approach to assess internationalisation, integrating an analysis of ‘gallery composition and network embeddedness’ (Vecco *et al.* 2021, 326). This enables an assessment of the fair's international status that is both quantitative and qualitative in nature. Utilising the paradigm of Chinese fairs, this study demonstrates how these events transformed from local congregations and ‘import platforms’ to international hubs following 2012 (Vecco *et al.* 2021, 337). This evolution has given them the ability to act as cultural diplomats and promote their national identity. A similar approach to fairs in Vienna, such as *viennacontemporary*, can be employed to explore how Austrian fairs are integrated into international networks, the strategies they use to attract leading galleries from Europe and the United States, and how they shape the city's status as a cultural centre. Vecco, Chang, and Zanola demonstrate how art fairs can act not only as trading platforms but also as complex cultural exchange infrastructures and tools for global influence (Vecco *et al.* 2021, 339). Related ideas can be found in Thompson’s chapter (2011), which explores the strategic utilisation of government subsidies to enhance the cultural and economic significance of art fairs in the example of Abu Dhabi's substantial investments in promoting its fair. As mentioned by Thornton, that ‘international art fairs are usually hosted by a city that also gains in cultural value as its art fair grows in fame’ (Thornton 2009, 252). This approach is particularly valuable for comparative studies of the European, Middle Eastern, and Asian art markets.

These observations could be matched with Quemin's (2013) analysis of the geography of international art fairs. Although Austria regularly organises one significant international fair (especially for the Eastern European Art sector), *viennacontemporary*, the country itself is not among the central players in the global art market, such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, and Switzerland. As Quemin writes, ‘these countries follow 12 others (he includes Austria in this list), each of which organises only one significant international contemporary art fair’ (Quemin 2013, 8), which looks more like ambitious rather than being serious competitors. Moreover, Quemin emphasises that even in the context of the art market's growing transnationality, its national dimension retains its structural significance. The flows of art and

capital, he says, ‘are embedded in and supported by the hierarchical structure of national units’ (Quemin 2013, 12). Consequently, Vienna's attempts to establish itself in the global art infrastructure cannot be understood outside the context of its national cultural policy, institutional history, and specific position on the periphery of the Western European art world.

Thus, Viennese art fairs are not only commercial events but also ritualised platforms where ‘internationality’ becomes a performative act. Through the language of branding, the participation of selected international galleries, and visual strategies for stand design, they construct an image of the city as an international cultural centre while simultaneously reproducing local boundaries of recognition and inclusion.

The theoretical approaches discussed demonstrate that art fairs and internationalism are not static structures, but rather dynamic and processual formations. However, in order to understand how exactly these structures are reproduced, transformed, or contested, it is necessary to turn to those who are directly involved in their creation and maintenance daily. At the centre of these processes are gallery owners and art dealers—actors who work daily at the intersection of global and local logics, institutional expectations, and market constraints.

In this study, gallery owners are not the direct objects of analysis in the classical ethnographic sense. The voices of gallery owners and art dealers in this work should be viewed not as the subject of research in itself but as an analytical perspective through which it becomes possible to trace how internationalism is planned, articulated, and understood from within the market. Their narratives allow us to capture the logic of decision-making, expectations and limitations faced by professional actors operating at the intersection of local context and global art infrastructures.

In this sense, art dealers act in the study primarily as mediators of knowledge about the market and its mechanisms. It is their statements that allow us to present the art market as a reflective space in which internationality not only exists as a structural condition, but is constantly rethought, discussed and strategically constructed. In this way, it seems important to also refer to studies devoted to gallery owners and art dealers in the literature review.

Gallerists and Art dealing

In the literature on the contemporary art market, dealers are traditionally approached as central intermediaries between artists, collectors and institutions. However, within the context of art fairs, there has been a notable shift in their role. They no longer function as autonomous entities but rather operate within the institutional and symbolic framework of the fair, adapting to its economic and performative rules. As Velthuis (2005) emphasises, market interactions in the art world cannot be viewed exclusively through the prism of rational economic models; the pricing process often

becomes a ‘ “game of perception”, a “secret”, or even a “random assumption” ’ (Velthuis 2005, 123). In the article *Symbolic meanings of prices: Constructing the value of contemporary art in Amsterdam and New York galleries* Velthuis demonstrates that dealers and gallery owners function as a form of ‘gate-keepers and translators’ between the aesthetic and economic value of art, using different pricing strategies (Velthuis 2003, 197–198). The primary objective of these entities is to metamorphose artistic qualities into market signals, thereby fostering trust, prestige and pricing stability. At the same time, art dealers act like patrons for artists, trying to protect them from the lack of market knowledge (Velthuis 2003, 199). Herrero (2009) further notes that, as such an emotional influence or agent, art dealers use emotional vocabulary when pricing art. This raises the question of whether art market participants use emotion as a form of capital to differentiate themselves from others (Herrero 2009, 917). Art dealers have become key figures that determine the cultural legitimacy and market significance of works, not just intermediaries between artists and buyers. As Meyer and Even (1998) observe, dealers act as the ‘main source of income’ and influence the trajectory of an artist's career (Meyer and Even 1998, 282).

Petterson (2014) also suggests viewing dealers as ‘translators’ who interpret and shape the understanding of what is considered ‘good art’. He notes that ‘the art market needs translators (or experts) <...>these “translators” do not simply convey facts and figures, they add their personal interpretations and understanding of art today’ (Petterson 2014, 68). Such actors, whom the author calls ‘tastemakers’, have the power to set standards of quality, but their authority is based on recognition by their peers and functions within closed professional circles (Petterson 2014, 69). Santander (1999) differentiates art dealers and gallerists: art dealers are art connoisseurs but without gallery space, which are limited in promotional methods and space, forcing him to restrict the time given collectors for the validation process (Santander 1999, cited in Rodner & Thomson 2013, 6). At the same time, Alexander and Bowler (2014) proposed different perspectives on the differentiation of art dealers. They start with an intake that their professional activity is permeated by a certain paradox: they are involved in the commercial sphere – buying and selling works – but at the same time, they work with objects that are traditionally perceived as being outside the logic of the market (Alexander & Bowler 2014, 11). To mitigate this tension between aesthetic and economic value, gallery owners try to minimise the visibility of the commercial side of their work – ‘sotto voce’ (Alexander & Bowler 2014, 11). So, the use of the word ‘gallery owner’ instead of ‘dealer’ allows them to emphasise their cultural mission and align their activities with the ‘institutional sphere of art’ – museums and non-profit galleries – thereby overshadowing its market nature (Alexander & Bowler 2014, 11). In the Austrian context, it is important to highlight

the distinction between art dealers and gallerists, even though gallerists are typically considered a subset of art dealers in the academic literature. Historically, art dealing in Austria has been associated with several negative phenomena, especially in the late 1980s and the early 1990s, during the collapse of the art market. During this period, the activities of so-called ‘information galleries’ drew criticism (Mejstrik 2006, 131), and art dealers themselves were often perceived as actors primarily focused on quick profits rather than building the reputation or career of the artist. Even contemporary interviews with gallerists confirm this viewpoint: they draw a sharp line, noting that art dealers are more focused on commercial gain and sales than on the long-term positioning of the artist and the formation of their artistic value.

Rodner and Thomson (2013) emphasise the dual nature of dealers – between commerce and cultural mediation. They refer to art dealers as ‘taste makers’ and ‘cultural gatekeeper’ who ‘open the doors to the opaque world of art to the general public’ (Rodner & Thomson 2013, 5). At the same time, as the authors note, their power is based on the ability to qualify an object as art ‘simply by treating it as art’ (Moody 2005, cited in Rodner & Thomson 2013, 6). However, more recent studies emphasise that the work of an art dealer is not limited to economic strategies or aesthetic expertise. Rojas and De La Torre (2023), introducing the concept of ‘proximate connoisseurs’, identify two logics that govern their practices: ‘competitive logic’, focused on achieving economic benefits, and ‘communal logic’, aimed at creating communities of artists rather than individual prestige (Rojas & De La Torre 2023, 1–2). Although their research is based on field data, the authors view the art dealer primarily through the prism of social status, prestige, and the key professional function of promoting art.

Plattner also poses a similar gap when he discusses the need to anthropologically examine how art world actors position themselves on the path from an ‘identity-oriented producer to a profit-oriented producer’ (Plattner 1998, 491). He notes that dealers and other ‘connoisseurs’ possess ‘taste’ or knowledge about value which the consumer lacks’ (Plattner 1998, 490). Consequently, they can widen and have limited access to the local art market. However, Plattner also emphasises the limitations of their predictive power: ‘It is extremely difficult to predict success in advance’ (Plattner 1998, 488–490). Particularly important for understanding the context of art fairs is his observation that the degree of influence that dealers and experts have on the formation of the ‘aura of an art object depends on the degree of locality of the market. In local markets, social evaluations are stronger than institutional evaluations because there is no supporting evidence in the form of sales, exhibitions, or publications. According to Plattner, ‘the more local the market, the less supporting information about comparable sales and prior bona fides such as exhibitions, prizes, and publications exists, and the stronger the purely social valuations become’ (Plattner 1998, 490).

Thus, dealers at fairs operate in a dual mode: they are simultaneously mediators and performers of the structural roles embedded in the performative value production mechanism. Their activity is not simply a commercial strategy but a form of cultural mediation where economic, symbolic, and social are inextricably intertwined. Based on our understanding of the role of art fairs and dealers, I will now turn to the correlation between local and global dynamics, using Vienna as an example.

Despite the growing number of studies of art markets, the question of how the ‘internationality’ of art is articulated and experienced at Vienna's art fairs through the actions of gallery owners and institutional practices remains insufficiently studied in ethnographic literature. While global art fairs such as Basel and Frieze attract some interest from researchers, smaller, region-specific fairs and the practices of dealers working for them have received relatively little analytical attention. This leaves unanswered questions about how the concept of ‘international’ is formed, how negotiations are conducted, and how it is used in evaluation processes at the intersection of local and global art markets.

4. Theoretical Frameworks

This study focuses on the Austrian art field, where the interrelationships between global, international, and local levels can be traced. This methodological approach facilitates an understanding of how internationality is constructed and manifested in specific institutional and market practices, which will be the subject of further theoretical and empirical analysis. Within the scope of the current research, I build my theoretical ground on the following frameworks: the anthropology of art worlds, globalisation studies, economic anthropology with a focus on the art market and value-making, and the anthropology of place and space. By combining these perspectives, the study aims to demonstrate how Vienna's art fairs become spaces where ideas about the 'internationality' of art are formed and reinforced, facing the resistance from the local context, and how participants engage in processes of recognition, institutional validation, and the exchange of values on a global scale.

Art World

Rothenberg and Fine view art worlds as communities that can be divided into three categories based on their participants, none of which can function independently of the other two (Rothenberg & Fine 2008, 34). The same perception of art worlds as communities shows Filitz, pointing out that we deal with 'a global art world network, that is, a plurality of interconnected art worlds' or 'pluralism through connection' (Filitz 2014, 101). The art world is seen as a global, dynamic, and open system in which internationality is manifested through constant intersections, knowledge exchange, interaction and trade. To comprehend the nature of the art world as a global phenomenon, it is necessary to draw upon Becker's theoretical framework (Becker 1982). According to this perspective, the art world is conceptualised as a collective endeavour aimed at creating artistic works. A key feature of this system is the strict delineation of responsibilities among the participants in the process: the artist, as the core of the field, engages in activities solely within the context of social connections and interactions that shape him as a creator. The art world, therefore, is not fixed geographically or temporally but is a network of interdependent actors and institutions, where art is the intersection point of negotiations, interactions, and disputes between participants. One of the key manifestations of this network structure is art fairs, which function as platforms for the commercial and symbolic evaluation of art, in addition to stimulating gallery activities and strengthening the positions of various actors in the global field. As Catherine Morel (2014) observed, art fairs are evolving into networking hubs that mirror hierarchies, power distribution, and the strategies employed by participants. Their attendance and participation serve as representations of the social and economic dynamics within the art world. These processes serve to confirm that the globality and internationality of the art field are realised through a network of

social interactions, institutional structures, and practices that form the modern picture of the international art world.

Internationality and Global Field

To fully comprehend the notion of internationalism within the context of the art world, it is essential to analyse it through the lens of research on globalisation and contemporary global structures, at the same time putting it in the relation to the locality. The extent to which art is truly global remains a major issue. In this sense, it is important to rethink what internationalism means in the artistic field and how it manifests itself in specific national and regional contexts. The concept of *glocalisation*, as proposed by Roland Robertson (1995), explains the interconnectedness of global and local processes, emphasising that the global process is not separable from the local process (Robertson 1995, 35). Robertson's argument demonstrates that the process of globalization does not result in the complete unification of the world. Instead, it is characterised by local adaptations and cultural peculiarities, leading to the emergence of novel hybrid forms of interaction. In this sense, global and local phenomena are in a constant state of co-creation; global trends adapt to the specifics of local contexts, and local practices, in turn, influence how global space is formed (Robertson 1995, 28). The temporal dimension of glocalisation signifies that these processes are invariably embedded in a historical context. Past events, traditions, and institutional frameworks have established parameters for the contemporary interaction between global and local elements (Robertson 1995, 36).

The Viennese art scene aspires to be integrated within the global artistic movement, yet it simultaneously endeavours to preserve its distinct local characteristics, which are intricately intertwined with its historical heritage and cultural infrastructure. In their article on Museums Quartier, Roodhouse and Mokre (2004) state that throughout its history, Austria has built its national identity around cultural and artistic achievements, shaping the country's image as a 'cultural nation' (Roodhouse & Mokre 2004, 194). Art has traditionally been patronised by the state, continuing the line of monarchical patronage dating back to the Habsburg era. However, since the early 2000s, there has been a noticeable shift: the government has begun to view culture not only as a sphere of symbolic capital but also as an element of 'new economic policy' (Roodhouse and Mokre 2004, 193). The reduction of subsidies and the emphasis on the self-sufficiency of artistic initiatives marked a transition to market logic. The principle that 'creativity should become part of the economy' signalled a break with the previous model of state patronage and redefined the role of art in national policy (Roodhouse & Mokre 2004, 193). Today, at the level of cultural policy, the city actively positions itself as an international centre for contemporary art and creative industries. However, further in this thesis we will see that despite the rhetoric of

globalism and the desire to participate in international cultural exchanges, the Viennese art market remains structurally localised.

A significant consequence of glocalisation is that globalisation engenders both homogeneity and heterogeneity (Robertson 1995, 27). The convergence of standardised forms, institutional models, and cultural practices with unique local interpretations, styles, and meanings is a hallmark of this process. It is evident that art fairs and exhibition spaces in Vienna function as ‘glocal hubs’, representing points of interaction between international artists, dealers and collectors with local institutions and the public.

Cicchelli *et al.* (2019) introduced the concept of ‘aesthetic cosmopolitanism’, which implies not only the free circulation of works and ideas between countries but also the recognition of specific national contexts as components of global cultural capital (Cicchelli *et al.* 2019, 2). This strongly supports the idea that the mechanisms of recognition and distribution of value in the cultural sphere continue to depend on traditional centres of power, thus only partially embodying universal equality (Cicchelli *et al.* 2019, 11). Adapting this concept to the global art market, I claim that it only partially embodies the idea of universal equality, as the mechanisms of recognition and distribution of value continue to depend on traditional centres of power: London, New York, Paris, and Basel. Although Vienna positions itself as a cultural crossroads of Europe and actively seeks to strengthen its status as an international art hub, it remains on the periphery of these centres of power. This example shows how cities outside ‘major art metropolises’ are trying to integrate into the system of aesthetic cosmopolitanism by creating their own forms of international interaction, facing limitations due to the unequal distribution of symbolic and economic capital in the global art field.

Art Market: Anthropology of Economics and Value-Making

In recent decades, anthropology and economic studies have paid considerable attention to the definition of value, claiming that the evaluation process is not just an economic mechanism, but also a social and cultural category. On the one hand, economic value includes exchange and market relationships, but on the other hand, value forms itself through social practices, norms, and traditions, bringing up cultural and symbolic value. This approach is especially relevant for studies of the art market, where the price of an art piece is seldom the only aspect of its value (Graeber 2001; Appadurai 1986; Gell 1998). In the scope of this research, I am using the theories on valuation as an instrument to understand how international or local branding becomes an evaluation tool at art fairs, involving its audience and institutions.

In this research, Alfred Gell's concept of 'agent' is employed as a foundational theoretical framework for understanding value (Gell 1998). According to Gell, a work of art functions as an 'agent' that can influence viewers' emotions, thoughts, and actions. He follows the idea that the value of art cannot be reduced to simple economic or material indicators, and it is imperative to consider how the object is embedded in social and cultural contexts (Gell 1998). Building on this theory, I claim that art fairs function as crucial sites where artwork is transformed into influential agents, shaping perceptions of value through complex social and cultural interactions.

By viewing gallerists through the lens of these concepts, it is important to note their role as mediators between artists and the market, creating narratives that add symbolic value to art. In this sense, the activities of dealers and galleries can be viewed as part of a system of agency, where they play a role in disseminating the influence of artwork by establishing a particular social status around them. A similar concept can be found in Bourdieu, who discusses the emotional impact between the object of art and the viewer but also emphasises the need to distinguish oneself from others (Bourdieu 1993).

Arjun Appadurai (1986), in his work *The Social Life of Things*, proposes viewing things as objects possessing a 'social life'. Things, including works of art, do not exist in isolation: they 'travel' through various social contexts, changing their value depending on the place, time, and actors involved in their circulation (Appadurai 1986). A similar idea is expressed by Kopytoff, who develops the theory of the 'cultural biography of things' (Kopytoff 1986). In this theory, the researcher interprets any object as biographically oriented, meaning that it acquires and changes its own value over different stages in time. For objects, this implies their traces in collections or market circulation through the buying and selling system. For example, an item hanging in a gallery may increase its value by participating in an international art fair, or it may lose its symbolic value if it takes part only in local art fairs. Thus, researchers can track the formation of the value and reputation of an art object under market conditions. From this perspective, the value of art is not static; it is shaped by a network of social and economic interactions. The context of art fairs can be seen as a field where the social life of art objects is embodied, and depending on the location, placement, and branding, an object adapts to a given social and cultural reality. Therefore, an object may acquire the status of belonging to global art, which enhances its value and symbolic significance.

An important academic work for this research became also a piece of Graeber (2001). In his work Graeber criticises three definitions of value: the economic, where value is seen through the desire to possess an object and is measured by what people are willing to offer for that desire; the sociological, which is based on the understanding that something is considered good; and the

linguistic, with its core in 'having meaningful difference' (Graeber 2001, 1–2). He also suggests that value should be considered as a concept rooted in human action (Graeber 2001, 47). For him, value arises within social practices or 'socialisation' (Graeber 2001, 68), and it cannot be fully reduced to a monetary equivalent. He concludes with the idea that despite value is formed through human production, but its realisation happens only when it is incorporated into social processes (Graeber 2001, 70–71). For this, people turn to valuable tokens of attention, such as money, precious metals, and relics (Graeber 2001, 70–71). This led to the situation when the price of an object becomes the tool for its evaluation. In this Graeber sees this the cause of fetishism, which he claims, cancels a creative action. Hence, the main political struggle lies not only in the appropriation of values but also in the freedom to define what is considered valuable in the first place (Graeber 2001, 88).

In Greber's logic, this tension can be described as a struggle between different value regimes coexisting within the same art field. So, if we look through this lens at out two categories – international and local - we can see the tense dialectic system in action. On the one hand, at the level of cultural policy and the state subsidy system, 'internationality' is elevated to a special value category. The participation of Austrian artists and galleries in international art fairs is institutionally encouraged and financially supported, and international visibility itself is seen as an indicator of cultural significance and successful integration into the global art world. On the other hand, at the local level, a stable value system continues to operate, within which belonging to the national art scene and working with local artists have an independent and often more significant symbolic meaning.

Anthropology of Place and Space Making

The concept of place and space will help to enrich the conversation about art fairs themselves. It is essential to recognise that art fairs, as a phenomenon, exhibit distinct characteristics. Drawing upon Marc Augé's concept of 'non-places' (Augé 1995), it is possible to consider art fairs as temporary, mobile, and focused on consumption platforms. However, art fairs evoke ephemeral yet profound forms of community based on professional recognition, symbolic capital, and the social status of participants (Bourdieu 1993; Petterson 2014; Rojas 2014). This favours Robertson's theoretical framework, where space is not conceived as a static entity but rather as a dynamic and socially constructed domain in wich diverse cultural and economic forces converge. In this sense, art fairs occupy a borderline position between 'place' and 'non-place'. They are characterised by their temporary and mobile nature, yet they play an important role in the processes of reputation building and institutional validation. The dual nature of art fairs, simultaneously ephemeral and socially significant, renders them a unique spatial-material phenomenon. The

circulation of art objects is intricately intertwined with the circulation of values, prestige and cultural capital (Graeber 2001; Bourdieu 1993).

In this context, it is useful to refer to the work of Maskel *et al.* (2006), who, in studying trade fairs, introduced the concept of ‘temporary clusters’. In the discussion on art fairs, it means that we are dealing with constitute spaces wherein intensive interactions between participants prevail, encompassing the exchange of knowledge, the generation of ideas, the formation of networks, and commercial transactions. This notion reinforces the study by Vecco *et al.* (2021) on art fairs in mainland China referenced in the *Literature Review* section. There, the authors conceptualise fairs as spaces where participants come together to share knowledge and experience.

In other article by Michel Callon and Fabian Muniesa, *Peripheral Vision: Economic Markets as Calculative Collective Devices*, we see that not just art fairs as an important market section but markets in general are described as collective calculative tools in which economic valuation is formed through the interaction of people, things, and technical devices (Callon & Muniesa 2005). What is also important is that at art fairs, we find following elements: disentanglement, when artworks are removed from their usual context and become objects of comparison; manipulation, including their display, cataloguing, and verbalization; and extraction of results, when a new form of value is created – market price, sale, or recognition (Callon & Muniesa 2005). Thus, the art fair functions as a distributed computational system in which evaluation is spread among people, technologies, and institutions. The placement of booths, catalogues, expert selections, and media coverage forms a kind of system that determines which artists and galleries will be deemed valuable. This process is not neutral; it is tied to asymmetries of power and access to resources, which makes it possible to shape the criteria of artistic significance. This approach allows art fairs to be seen not merely as venues for buying and selling but as special calculative spaces where artistic and commercial value are constructed through material and symbolic operations. Here, the evaluation of art is not an individual act of taste but a collective practice that unites dealers, collectors, curators, and market infrastructure. As a result, fairs become arenas not only of exchange but also of the production of the very category of value in the contemporary art world.

In the context of the Viennese art scene, it is essential to acknowledge the role of art fairs as platforms for establishing participants' status, cultivating opportunities for interaction, and fostering connections. However, it should be emphasised that this process remains controversial. In practice, despite the desire to transform Viennese fairs into special international events, their effect as centres of the global exchange of knowledge and experience is limited and not always fully realised. This conception of fairs as ephemeral spaces for the creation of cultural capital and international interaction enables us to perceive them not solely as commercial entities but also as

sites for the generation of cultural capital and international interaction, reflecting the complex dynamics of the contemporary art world.

The study of fairs provides a lens through which we can observe the dynamics of symbolic capital accumulation within a specific institutional context. It offers a means to examine the intersection of aesthetic autonomy and market heteronomy, as well as the capital mobilised by participants to enhance their positions within the field. In the context of the study of the international art fair in Vienna, the fair can be considered a special field of cultural production Bourdieu (1993) in which two poles collide and intersect, autonomous, and heteronomous. On the one hand, fair functions at the level of autonomy (Bourdieu 1993, 40–41): it ensures the recognition of artists and galleries, acting as a platform of aesthetic and symbolic value (for example, the presentation of the ‘*wienlive Award – The Best Emerging Vienna Based Position*’ to artist Vera Klimentyeva at the *SPARK Art Fair Vienna*). On the other hand, a fair is inherently linked to prevailing economic logic when primary focus lies on sales, attracting collectors, and commercial dynamics - indicative of heteronomous pole (Bourdieu 1993, 53). A variety of forms of capital are involved in this field, including economic (financial resources of galleries and collectors), cultural (knowledge and aesthetic competence of participants), social (networks of relations between artists, dealers, galleries), and symbolic (reputation, prestige, and awards). The international fair thus becomes a nexus for the concentration of the art market and a platform for constant struggle for positions and recognition (Bourdieu 1993, 31–32).

Part II. Empirical Analysis: The Viennese Art Fair Landscape

5. The Austrian Art Market in Times of (Art World) Crisis

5.1. Introduction: Austria on the Global Art Map

In October of this year, *Die Presse*, one of Austria's largest media outlets, published a brief article in which a journalist commented on a post by the American publication *Art in America* declaring Vienna as ‘the best art capital in Europe’⁴. Vienna is no stranger to such titles; some media sources and online statistics have consistently ranked it as the world's best city to live in⁵, while others have labelled it as the least friendly⁶. It would seem, then, that Vienna's claim to such an art title is quite justified: according to main portal of Stadt Wien the city has around 250 museums and collections. Nonetheless, the article's author reacts to this portrayal with a discernible derision – one thing is certain, and that is that the Viennese art market cannot compete with art world giants such as Paris or London: ‘There’s Art Basel Paris, which is opening soon, and here we have *viennacontemporary*. Nothing more needs to be said’^{7 8}.

Globally, the art market is structured around three dominant centres. Today, according to Art Basel & UBS (2025), the US holds 43% of the global market, the UK 18%, and China 15% of the global market (Arts Economics 2025, 17). These markets can be seen as the peaks of global values, while the European market (EU) declined by 8% to \$8.3 billion, with France contributing \$4.2 billion to the total (Arts Economics 2025,18), and are becoming secondary centres, moving downwards. Despite its rich artistic tradition and significant cultural infrastructure, Austria has yet to compete directly with global art centres.

Nevertheless, Austria occupies a strategically interesting position in the art world, which can be described as a semi-peripheral centre. Situated in Central Europe, Austria finds itself at a juncture where it can draw upon both ‘Western European standards’ (evidenced by the British, London, and Paris markets) and the legacy of the post-socialist space of Central and Eastern Europe, which is becoming an increasingly significant player in the art scene (Franz 2015, 169). Although it does

⁴ Spiegler 2025, *Die Presse*.

⁵ Note: According to *the EIU Global Liveability Index*, Vienna consistently ranks among the world's most liveable cities, coming in second place in 2025 and confidently holding the top spot from 2022 to 2024.

⁶ Note: According to *Expat Insider survey* for 2022 and 2023 to Vienna has ranked among the world's unfriendliest cities for expats.

⁷ Spiegler 2025, *Die Presse*.

⁸ *Original German*: ‘Dort die Art Basel Paris, die übrigens demnächst eröffnet, hier die *Viennacontemporary*. Mehr muss man dazu nicht sagen’.

not occupy a core position in the global art market, Vienna strategically leverages its cultural infrastructure – museums, galleries, fairs, and public art initiatives – to strengthen its status and visibility. In this sense, Vienna uses cultural planning not merely for local development but also as a tool to assert influence and attract attention within broader transnational networks (Stevenson 2013, 99). In this context, the crisis dynamics of the global art world appears precisely in a semi-peripheral context, characterised by the shocks of globalisation, the redistribution of capital and competition between institutions. These phenomena can be observed through the prism of the Austrian market.

The Austrian market is characterised by a robust institutional framework that provides substantial support for cultural institutions. State museums, academies, and cultural festivals receive significant investment, particularly in classical music and music festivals. This is indicative of the historical and symbolic status of culture as a pillar of Austrian identity. As the inheritor of the Habsburg Empire, the country continues to allocate resources to the development of cultural infrastructure. Through diplomatic channels, it has repeatedly underscored the assertion that art is an essential component of the national brand⁹.

Conversely, the primary art market is subject to inherent and structural limitations. In Austria, private galleries and the visual arts frequently find themselves on the periphery: state institutions are the primary recipients of funding, while the commercial visual arts sector receives comparatively little focus, with *Galerieförderung*¹⁰ being perhaps the only notable source of support. Consequently, despite the ‘symbolic richness’ of culture, economic opportunities for the private art sector remain limited.

This situation presents a paradox: Austria, on one hand, is a nation steeped in artistry with a rich historical and cultural legacy; on the other, its market lacks the commercial concentration and transnational influence typical of global centres. Nonetheless, its role as a semi-peripheral hub grants it unique value, serving as a bridge between Eastern and Western European art scenes. Here, the crises in the global art world are seen in a distinct and specific form.

The present research is based on a multifaceted approach that incorporates field observations (comprising participation in fairs and gallery life in Vienna), interviews with market actors (gallerists and art dealers), and a thorough analysis of secondary sources (legal documents, statistics, and media publications). This enables the conveyance of the local reality of the Austrian

⁹ see *Kulturstrategie 2025–2029* or *Basic Principles, Key Areas and Programmes* by BMEI.

¹⁰ Note: gallery funding system in Austria

market while also facilitating an examination of how global crises (economic, political, and institutional) are experienced in the context of semi-peripherality.

5.2. Historical and Structural Overview

In the aftermath of World War II, Austria underwent an extended period of recovery during which it was influenced by major global powers, notably Western nations and the Soviet Union. The Soviet occupation officially ended in 1955 with the signing of the Austrian State Treaty, which reinstated Austria's sovereignty (Larson 1987, 29). In the same year, Austria declared a policy of permanent neutrality, which was a significant development in its international policy and cultural strategies. This stance of neutrality allowed Austria to serve as a conduit between Eastern and Western Europe, a role that was later reflected in its cultural and artistic policies, establishing the country as a venue for cross-cultural engagement (Franz 2015).

During the post-war decades, Austria gradually attempted to integrate into European and global cultural and economic processes. As noted by Austrian market researcher Mejstrik, in the 1970s, contemporary art galleries began to receive active support at the state level to 'compensate for the criticised shortcomings of public art presentation' and were called 'information galleries'¹¹ (Mejstrik 2006, 131). He notes that at that time, there were no private collections of contemporary Austrian and international art, as a result of the lack of a specialised audience and media coverage of current international and domestic trends (Mejstrik 2006, 131). The situation changed in the 1980s, which became a decade of Austrian art market boom, and saw the emergence of more and more galleries working with contemporary art (Mejstrik 2006, 130). However, by 1989, the Austrian art market experienced its own crisis as part of a larger art economic downturn that affected Europe and the United States. This downturn hit local private galleries with low stability hard, and many of them closed. Nevertheless, the market for contemporary art, especially its international organisation, 'could no longer be ignored' (Mejstrik 2006, 131–132).

After the 1990s, the Austrian art market gradually integrated into the global system. The country's accession to the European Union in 1995 was a significant milestone, as it established a framework for the free movement of artworks, capital, and professionals within Europe (Franz 2011, 192). Nevertheless, there was no significant breakthrough in the international art trade, and Austria remained a relatively niche player. The Austrian government's policy on contemporary art in the 1990s was criticised for its lack of support and poor organisation of the art market, as detailed in unpublished Reddeker's project report *When Attitude Becomes Norm* (1994), cited in Mejstrik's work (2006). This report pointed to structural shortcomings in the support provided to galleries

¹¹ *Original German*: 'Informationsgalerie'.

and artists and became a critical basis for a further rethinking of state policy, which in turn paved the way for the development of new models of support – for example, inspiring the later creation of gallery support programmes in 1996¹². The state attempted to rectify the situation by investing in a large institutional entity, the Kunsthalle Wien, established in 1992 and billed as a platform for contemporary art focused on international programmes. Art historians have noted that such institutions contribute to the opening up of the Austrian contemporary art market:

the main credit for freeing Austrian art from its insularity was to go to a number of new institutions founded from the mid-1980s. The Generali Foundation ... Kunsthalle Wien (since 1992) ... those primarily responsible for ending the isolation of Vienna's art scene...(Höller 2006)¹³.

Since the early 2000s, cultural policy has intensified to create infrastructure for contemporary art and form platforms for international exchange. A landmark project in this regard is the *MuseumsQuartier Vienna*, opened in 2001. The initiative served as a link between leading cultural institutions and approximately 60 smaller initiatives (Biondi *et al.* 2020; Roodhouse & Mokre 2007). The project has become the largest cultural zone in Central Europe and functions as a cultural cluster, bringing together various institutions and events in the field of contemporary art (Biondi *et al.* 2020, 3). Today, according to European studies of the cultural and creative sector (including visual arts, design, and mediation), Austria is home to hundreds of thousands of enterprises. However, individual estimates identify approximately 24,000 companies operating at a professional level in the art, design, and cultural mediation segment (Kreativwirtschaft Austria 2024). This figure reflects the share of the specialised art sector, which encompasses galleries, design studios, cultural mediation services and agencies.

An important step toward the Austrian art market's presence on the international stage was the Vienna Art Week (VAW). In 2024, the event featured around 100 programs and brought together more than 70 partner venues, including galleries, museums, universities, and independent art spaces¹⁴. These figures highlight the central role of Vienna's local artistic ecosystem. Consequently, the market retains a predominantly Viennese structure, with limited international engagement beyond the capital. External activities remain largely anchored in Vienna's established infrastructure. The event is concentrated in central urban locations, and international interest tends to appear through institutional participation rather than through broad market involvement.

¹² Habitzel, Susanne, n.d., "Das Bundeskuratorenmodell und die staatliche Kulturpolitik Österreichs in den 90er Jahren."

¹³ Höller 2006, Metropolis M.

¹⁴ Vienna Art Week 2024.

The Austrian art market constitutes a relatively youthful yet resilient segment of the European art system. The Art Basel UBS 2024 report indicates that the Austrian market has demonstrated resilience in the face of global turbulence within the art industry, largely attributable to the robust position of the secondary market, as represented by auction houses (Art Economics 2024, 136), specifically the country's oldest auction house, *Dorotheum*. In addition to its strong secondary market, Austria, and specifically Vienna, is famous for its considerable number of annual art events, such as festivals and fairs. Altogether, around 8–9 fairs are held in Vienna every year.

The Austrian art market exhibits pronounced centralisation around Vienna, with state institutions playing a considerable role. Other cities, such as Graz and Innsbruck, are undoubtedly significant, but their influence is considerably less pronounced. This segment has been shaped by a multitude of historical and political factors, the process of European integration, and the implementation of proactive cultural policies.

Altogether, the creative sector estimates that 60–70% of participants in the Austrian art world are either Austrian or local companies (Kreativwirtschaft Austria 2024, 2025). This observation lends further credence to the hypothesis that the market is local in nature and primarily oriented towards the domestic art community. Despite its local character, the Austrian art scene demonstrates a desire for international recognition through initiatives such as Vienna Art Week and the art fairs, as well as through the activities of major galleries and auction houses.

The Austrian art market is divided into state and non-state sectors. The non-state art sector is primarily represented by galleries; however, its number remains relatively small. According to the most recent Gallery Guide, published by the Austrian gallery association¹⁵ for autumn 2025, there are only 89 private galleries operating in Vienna (Gallery Guide Austria 2025). These galleries are predominantly local commercial galleries, both market-oriented and with an international programme, as well as 39 art institutions, including various museums, cultural centres, and Kunsthalle. In other states, the number of galleries is even more limited, ranging from ten to fifteen for the entire region. Most Austrian galleries are family run, creating a closed community that shapes the market. This is reflected in the limited number of collectors and the relatively few significant private collections. As expressed by gallerist 2 during the field-interview: 'we always have an internal joke: we say we (Austria) have more galleries than collectors' (Interview 16.07.2025).

¹⁵ *Original German*: 'Der Verband österreichischer Galerien'

The state art sector remains the dominant force in the Austrian art world today. This sector includes museums and cultural clusters, such as the MuseumsQuartier. It receives the main support and subsidies, especially during times of crisis. Meanwhile, the private sector faces significant challenges. This became particularly apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic.

5.3. Structures of Support and Constraint: Government Policy, Subsidies and the Institutional Framework of the Austrian Art Market

Austria's state-supported arts system forms a complex institutional landscape, where subsidies, cultural policy, and tax regimes simultaneously stabilise and constrain the art market. In the European context, cultural policy is traditionally considered part of the wider social policy and welfare state landscape. It is situated at the intersection of the state's obligations to its citizens and the production of cultural goods (Menger 2010, 1–2). This approach emphasises the dual nature of art: on the one hand, art functions as a public good requiring collective investment; on the other, it functions as a market sector subject to economic fluctuations and institutional barriers. In this sense, state support measures – from subsidies to tax breaks – perform an important social function by protecting vulnerable professional groups and supporting critical infrastructure for the functioning of the artistic field (Blakemore & Warwick-Booth 2013).

Multi-level support system: EU – national – local

The system for regulating and supporting the arts in Austria functions on three levels: European (including Creative Europe programmes), national (the Federal Ministry for Arts, Culture, Civil Service, and Sport), and local (regional institutions such as the Landtagsrat Wien). At the national level, resource distribution and cultural strategy development play a crucial role, with a network of advisory bodies (*Beiräte*) providing support. Concurrently, the sector is represented by its own interest groups, primarily the Kulturrat and IG Kultur Österreich (IGKÖ), the largest national association of art and culture. These organisations serve as intermediaries between the state and the professional community, articulating the sector's needs and shaping the agenda in public debates. The Austrian gallery sector has an extensive system of professional associations. One such association is the Association of Austrian Galleries of Modern Art (*Verband Österreichischer Galerien Moderner Kunst*), founded in 1975 by art dealer Hans Knoll. It represents the interests of galleries, advises members on legal issues, and participates in forming cultural policy. Some members later branched off to create the ARGE Austrian Galleries, and cooperation between the organisations intensified in the context of the crisis.

Despite the formal diversity of instruments, cultural policy changes since 2011 have been limited. The main elements of the system – the social insurance scheme for the self-employed (SVS) and

the Artists' Social Insurance Fund (KSVF) – provide financial support to artists and cultural workers during periods of temporary unemployment. As IG Bildende Kunst reports since 2015, the KSVF has distributed up to €500,000 annually¹⁶. However, this level of support is often considered insufficient to stimulate sectoral development. The pandemic exposed the vulnerability of the arts sector, prompting a sharp expansion in government support mechanisms. Since 2020, the following support measures have been introduced:

- NPO–Fonds programmes for cultural organisations
- Expanded SVS funds (in some cases up to €10,000)
- Increased KSVF budgets (up to €10 million and up to €3,000 per person)
- Support of up to €33,000 from the WKO Chamber of Commerce (WKO, 16 January 2025)
- Gallery funding '*Galerieforderung*':

The Federal Ministry of Arts, Culture, Civil Service, and Sport implements a support model for commercial galleries through a museum procurement system. The allocated budget is €36,000 per year, with museums committing to increase it to €54,000. A minimum of €18,000 must be spent to purchase works by young artists. Both institutions and individuals with Austrian citizenship or permanent residency are eligible for funding. The funds are used to organise exhibitions in Austria and overseas, produce catalogues, and provide working grants. Despite its relatively small size, this scheme plays an important role in supporting galleries by guaranteeing turnover and strengthening links between museums and the private art market.

However, the perception of these measures among art sector representatives remains controversial, with a widespread feeling of 'insignificance' in the eyes of the state reflecting the discrepancy between public declarations about the importance of culture and the real opportunities for market participants to function sustainably in the sector. My interviews with gallery owners revealed their mixed feelings about state support. 'Public support for each sector is important if it is done wisely and professionally', my interlocutor critically argues, 'in Austria, people do not think with their own heads but they put it to the bureaucrats' (Interview 23.10.2025). While subsidies are considered vital for maintaining basic infrastructure, they are not conducive to development or international growth:

Also like the issue of this system of public funding which also puts in favour all the activities which are connected to Austria and to Vienna and not international activities and

¹⁶ IG Bildende Kunst 2025.

not quality because the local aspect is more important than the quality aspect, which leads necessarily to provincialization (Interview 23.10.2025).

Tax policy as a structural constraint

For 2025, Austria has one of the highest reduced VAT rates on art in Europe – 13%, which is significantly higher than in most other countries, where rates are set at 5.5% (France), 7% (Germany), or even 5% (Italy). Even outside the EU, conditions are proving more favourable: the United Kingdom (5%), Switzerland (8.1%), and recently Luxembourg announced a reduction in the rate to 8%¹⁷ in response to the EU Directive 2022/542¹⁸, which came into force on 1 January 2025. This directive restricted the use of preferential schemes and forced markets to adapt by lowering the rates. Austria has not yet done so, which has increased pressure on the local art market and sparked criticism from gallery owners and fair participants alike.

The Austrian Gallery Association issued a strongly worded statement on 27 June 2025 calling on the government to reduce the value-added tax (VAT) on works of art from the current 13% to the European minimum. In an open letter published via OTS–Presseaussendung, representatives of the community stated:

The Austrian art market is under big pressure. The geopolitical crises of recent years, economic uncertainty, and the disappearance of London as a central trading hub in Europe have triggered a market shift, with clear disadvantages for Austria as a business location¹⁹.

As stated in the report, buyers from Italy, France, and Germany requested that invoices be issued in other countries. This has resulted in Austria losing its sales and tax revenue. Lack of institutional support become an important factor in this regard. The situation turned out to be a potential threat to young gallery owners. The association stated that young curators and art entrepreneurs are unable to identify economic prospects in this sector and, therefore, either move into the non-profit sector or register their businesses abroad. This undermines the sustainability of this field. ‘This means not only loss of revenue for Austrian galleries and loss of income for the artists they represent, but also reduced income for the state – and a cultural bloodletting’²⁰.

The differential application of Value Added Tax (VAT) diminishes the appeal of art projects, galleries, and fairs to participants on an international level, a phenomenon that is especially salient in cases where sales exceed a critical threshold, at which point the VAT becomes a substantial

¹⁷ Komarek 2025, Die Presse.

¹⁸ European Union European Union. Council Directive (EU) 2022/542 of 5 April 2022 Amending Directives 2006/112/EC and (EU) 2020/285 as Regards Rates of Value Added Tax.

¹⁹ OTS–Presseaussendung 2025.

²⁰ Ibid.

expense. Art dealer Louis Wienerroither emphasised this point to Die Presse: ‘Our 13% tax rate is terrible. Compared to 5.5% in France and 7% in Germany, this puts us at a serious competitive disadvantage’²¹. Gallery owner Martin Janda added, ‘Ten percent is the difference that determines where a purchase will be made’²². Thus, the tax system not only limits local sales but also reduces galleries' ability to integrate into global chains.

Paradoxically, the pandemic demonstrated that another development option was possible. During the pandemic, the VAT rate on art was temporarily reduced to 5%. This measure was confirmed by several sources, including IG Kultur Österreich, the TPA Group, and MeinBezirk.at. According to Szaal, the President of the Association of Austrian Antique and Art Dealers, the effect was immediate: ‘The tax reduction led to an increase in purchases and tax revenues. The state did not lose out – it earned more’²³. However, once the pandemic ended, the rate returned to its previous level, reinstating the structural barriers that had previously existed.

5.4. The Art World in Crisis: Global and Local Reflections

Since the pandemic outbreak, the art world has experienced a new wave of crises. While crises in the art sector are nothing new, the pandemic has exacerbated and exposed long-standing structural issues in the global art world. By 2022, the closure of international fairs, cancellation of exhibitions, suspension of regular programs, and introduction of strict lockdowns had clearly taken a serious toll on the economic functioning of the art market and the cultural interactions of its key players. As Komarek²⁴ in Die Presse notes, ‘The global art market suffered a clear setback in 2024’²⁵, underscoring the scale of the decline in activity and price indices on the international stage.

The contemporary art market crisis is a complex, multidimensional phenomenon. Key dimensions on one side include increased commercialisation, undermining legitimacy mechanisms, overproduction of art objects, and structural digital transformation, including NFT markets, digital art, and generative AI (Calvo 2023; Ghosh & Fossas 2022; Petterson 2014). Commercialisation is evident in the art world's growing reliance on investment logic, where a work of art is primarily considered a financial asset. This is directly linked to the issue of legitimacy. In conditions of instability and a covid period of lack of live interaction, the traditional system of recognition, which is based on institutional networks, vernissages, and personal contacts, was disrupted

²¹ The interview quoted in Komarek 2025, Die Presse.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Komarek 2025, Die Presse.

²⁵ *Original German*: ‘Der globale Kunstmarkt hat 2024 einen klaren Dämpfer erhalten’.

(Joselit 2020; Velthuis & Baia Curioni 2015). Overproduction increases pressure, with too many works and a lack of sustainable institutional channels for their recognition:

Fifty years ago, there were not so many artists [the gallerist explained during our meeting this summer]. ‘The art scene was much more comprehensible. Now it is very broad. Every day, new artists stream in. Everyone wants to be an artist. I receive 100 requests on Instagram and everywhere else. People send me stuff. Everyone wants to exhibit. With so many people calling themselves artists or being artists but not so much, there are very few who can survive from it (Interview 16.07.2025).

The crisis affects not only the economy but also the social structure of the art world. According to research by Buchholz *et al.* personal connections and subcultural market groups have become key to survival during the pandemic: long-established social networks have helped galleries and dealers stay afloat, while new market participants have been particularly vulnerable (Buchholz *et al.* 2020, 473). This approach highlights the anthropological nature of the crisis, emphasising that it is not merely an economic shock, but also a rupture in the social capital that has long sustained the market.

The pandemic was a critical moment of loss of support, with a significant proportion of art communication moving online. This is especially challenging for art forms based on physical perception and social interaction. Researchers have emphasised that the arts sector has historically been slower than other industries to adapt to digital formats, the so-called ‘*Baumol–Bowen Thesis*’ (Cameron 2019, 17). Attempts to transfer offline experiences online often encounter limitations; a virtual gallery, for example, can serve as an exhibition space, but it does not reproduce the key social dimension of the art world.

In this art world instability, Austria became a striking example of this global crisis at the national level. Private galleries found themselves under severe pressure, with many losing incomes owing to the cancellation of fairs and exhibitions. Not all of them were able to recover after the pandemic. Some never reopened, and others significantly reduced their activities. During this period, state support was primarily directed at state cultural institutions, leaving the private sector vulnerable. Representatives of the gallery association publicly criticised the inadequacy of the aid and organised public appeals and demonstrations²⁶ but this did not lead to significant changes. According to a report by the Federal Ministry for Arts, Culture, the Civil Service and Sport updated

²⁶ Note: for example, a Petition in September for the government to increase financial aid for the art and culture sector from Kulturrat or *demonstration Schweigemarsch 2020. Ohne Kunst wird's still* in July 2020

in 2021, the cultural sector in Austria suffered a loss of € 1,5–2 billion damage to the Corona Crisis, which was a ‘quarter of the annual added value’²⁷.

Although the pandemic became a turning point in the rapid development of crisis frameworks, it was not the beginning:

So, this kind of, let us say, exaggeration of the market already, this we faced already before the pandemic time [shared the gallerist]. I mean, even before COVID, there was already this kind of a certain decline of, let us say, the ‘happy moments’ of let us say what was like maybe 15 years ago or 20 years ago. Then there was like, the pandemic time, of course, there was a kind of a still, a kind of a still standing situation (Interview 23.10.2025)

However, as the pandemic ended, the crisis intensified.

The year after was still kind of a new hope. Therefore, it started quite enthusiastically. That was approximately a year after COVID. But then slowly, but rapidly, I mean, let us say, continuously, it came now to what of course even other galleries would now call a crisis (Interview 23.10.2025).

Statistics from subsequent years confirm that global art sales fell by approximately 12% in 2024, while auction house turnover decreased by 25% (Art Economics 2024, 26). Clare McAndrew, founder of Arts Economics, highlights an important trend for 2025: ‘While the market has declined in value for two years, the growth in sales at lower, more affordable prices has been one of the most positive developments’²⁸. In other words, despite the overall decline, sales of affordable works (up to \$50,000) are increasing. The same tendency is observed in the Austrian market. This was confirmed through one of my interviews: ‘I think the sales went really down. What still sells is young or cheaper I that people can afford <...> Yeah, it’s happening’ (Interview 16.07.2025). In addition to global factors, the local situation in Austria reflects the market characteristics and stability identified by *PARNASS*²⁹: the Austrian art market is described as ‘rather quiet but stable’³⁰. However, Austrian market has shown resilience attributing this to the strong secondary (auction) market. The vulnerability and struggles of the primary market (private galleries) show that ‘resilience’ is not uniform and is largely confined to one segment, which could be made more explicit to avoid a potentially misleading generalization.

²⁷ Compendium of Cultural Policies & Trends, “Austria: COVID-19 Measures for Culture in Austria,” n.d.

²⁸ Interview quoted in The Art Basel and UBS Global Art 2025, Press release.

²⁹ Pinter 2025, PARNASS.

³⁰ *Original German*: ‘Österreich eine eher stille, aber beständige Rolle im globalen Kunsthandel’.

However, the pandemic, new technological formats such as NFTs and digital art, generative AI, growing global uncertainty, geopolitical turmoil, and economic nationalism have created new challenges that exacerbate the long-standing problem of overproduction:

That during Corona, I think it was okay for some of us that sold online, elaborates the gallerist, and then since then there's just a drop or at the moment since the war in Ukraine, and then we have another war now and we have multiple crisis, and we have a higher awareness of shipping and travelling costs and also, costs for the environment (Interview 16.07.2025).

If there is a country where there is a war, I am sorry, but I cannot (go there to exhibit the art pieces). Yes, if they asked me to go to Afghanistan, and it would be the most famous gallery, I would not go - adds another interlocutor (Interview 11.07.2025).

Thus, the current art crisis is a multi-layered phenomenon involving economic, institutional and cultural changes. This has been exacerbated by the pandemic and subsequent transformations. The Austrian case clearly demonstrates that local consequences only serve to highlight global trends: the structural vulnerability of the private art market, dependence on offline formats, and the need to reconsider working models in the context of ongoing instability.

5.5. Conclusion

The Austrian art market exhibits a dual character that can be viewed as a microcosm of the crisis in the contemporary global art world. While this system maintains the stability of the local sector, it also largely reinforces its internal orientation. On the one hand, state and institutional rhetoric emphasises high cultural ambitions. On the other hand, everyday market practice reveals a significant degree of local isolation, characterised by a small group of regular customers, limited sales, and structural barriers. The state subsidy system, tax policy, and institutional mechanisms simultaneously support and limit the development of the Austrian art market.

This duality is a symptom of the crisis: symbolic internationalism clashes with real economic and institutional vulnerabilities. Galleries must balance their desire for global visibility with the need to survive under local conditions. The experience of the pandemic has shown that temporary measures, such as reducing VAT on art to 5%, can stimulate market activity and increase sales and tax revenues. However, once the rate returns to 13%, the economic barriers are reinforced.

The Austrian art market is strongly locally oriented and highly centralised around Vienna, creating a kind of 'local bubble': galleries and institutions focus on Austrian artists and local support networks, while internationalism and access to global markets play a secondary role. Structural

constraints - high taxation on art, the private sector's dependence on state subsidies, and the concentration of resources in museums and cultural clusters - limit commercial activity and the development of the private market. In addition, the market is characterised by a limited concentration of collectors and capital, which hinders the formation of significant international influence on the market. In other words, Vienna is generally appreciated for its aesthetic appeal and historical significance; however, the art community does not see it as a major economic hub for contemporary art. It has symbolic significance but not economic or international significance.

Hence, the Austrian market exemplifies how the art world crisis shows in semi-peripheral centres: ambitious goals collide with local economic and institutional barriers, and government grants, gallery associations, and crisis measure only partially ensure the sector's sustainability. Austria uses its rich cultural heritage to strengthen local sustainability but does not occupy a leading position in the global art world. The tensions between ambition and structure are most visible in the sphere of art fairs, where attempts are made to reconcile Austria's local realities with global aspirations.

Art fairs are a key platform for further analysing the dynamics of the Viennese art market, where local constraints and international ambitions meet. They serve two functions: first, they provide visibility by offering galleries a platform to showcase Austrian art to an international audience. Second, they facilitate internationalisation by enabling local participants to integrate into global networks and establish contact with international collectors and industry professionals. However, fairs also reveal the structural constraints discussed in the previous sections, such as high VAT, limited government subsidies, and the financial risks of promoting art outside Austria.

6. International Art Fairs in Local Context: Vienna

At all art fairs I attended this year in Vienna, my attention as a viewer inevitably shifts between the different scales. The names of cities and countries on gallery stands, the languages spoken in the halls, the biographies of artists, and the texts of curatorial descriptions formed a dense field of references to the ‘outside’ world in my mind. At the same time, the fair space seemed deeply rooted in local reality: in the architecture of the exhibition booths, in the composition of the audience, in the presence of museum institutions, in the rhythms of the city, and in the unspoken rules of communication between participants. These two dimensions do not exist separately from each other but constantly intersect, entering a subtle and not always obvious interaction.

In the everyday practices of fairs, this interaction revealed itself not in loud statements, but in small gestures and situations: in which galleries ended up in the central areas of the exhibition, which works attracted the interest of collectors, what questions were asked of artists, and where exactly the ‘value’ of a work was expected to come from. It was also evident in the brief handshakes between artists and gallery owners and in the critical comments over a cup of coffee about how one would never see such an exhibition space structure in Greece. Works created outside Austria are not simply transferred to the Viennese context but undergo processes of translation, explanation, and correlation with local expectations. Their status and significance are not determined in advance, but rather during specific meetings, conversations, and decisions that take place within the fair space.

In these situations, it becomes apparent that participation in an international art fair does not guarantee recognition or success. On the contrary, it makes particularly visible the conditions under which art is considered ‘appropriate’, ‘understandable’, or ‘worthy of attention’ in a specific place and at a specific moment in time. The fair thus acts not only as a platform for exchange, but also as an environment in which different ideas about the value, significance, and belonging of art collide.

6.1. Introduction. Art Fairs

Since the second half of the 20th century (specifically, since the first contemporary art fair held in Cologne in 1964), art fairs have gradually evolved into the most significant points of intersection in the globalising art world. Today, they function as key arenas in which the value, visibility, and legitimacy of works are discussed and demonstrated. As Taylor (2023) observes, the proliferation of fairs in the 21st century has been remarkable: while there were 68 international art fairs in 2005, by 2016 their number had almost quadrupled, reaching 270 events (Taylor 2023, 117; Stromberg 2016). This growth can be attributed not only to the increase in the number of galleries

and the emergence of new art scenes in cities around the world but also to the variety of fair formats targeting different segments of collectors – from antique fairs to contemporary art fairs (Taylor 2023, 117). Researcher Queminn (2013) discusses the phenomenon of the so-called ‘fair boom’, which refers to the strategic endeavours of nations to establish at least one international art fair within their borders, with the objective of enhancing their standing within the global art community. However, the statistics are rather dismal: most of these art events struggle to achieve international status, and many, having barely achieved it, can easily lose (see the example of CosMoscow in Moscow, which lost almost its entire international audience after the start of the military conflict with Ukraine in February 2022) (Taylor 2023, 115).

Statistics demonstrate that the majority of art fairs continue to be niche events and are unable to compete with the success of more prominent art events, such as Art Basel and its, London's Freeze, or German Art Cologne. In Austria, and Vienna in particular, the city's cultural calendar is characterised by a rich array of annual art events. These include the ambitious Art Week project, which aims to position Vienna within the global art system, as well as five fairs that position themselves as international and four art fairs that focus on the local context³¹. The number of events is increasing and this is despite criticism from representatives of the Austrian art world; for instance, in May 2025, the first edition of the Affordable Art Fair was held. This art fair aims to popularise collecting among various segments of the population by selling at affordable prices and has been already successfully held in many other cities worldwide.

However, what factors underlie the desire to fill the Viennese art scene with such an abundance of international events? This chapter explores how the concept of internationality is employed and formed within the local context of the Viennese art market, particularly within the framework of international art fairs. I analyse internationalism not as a given characteristic, but as a category constructed through processes – one of the tools of cultural and symbolic production that helps Vienna shape its position on the global art scene. For this, I discuss what does it mean to be an ‘international’ art fair in Austria and what goals and objectives are pursued by the organisers and participants in using this concept. I also turn to the state and municipal support, which are used to structure this image through funding and cultural diplomacy. All these points will help to identify a contrast between the narrative of ‘global visibility’ and the actual local dynamics. I finalise my research with 2 case studies on art fairs where I conducted field work between March and September 2025.

³¹ *Note:* This remarks exclusively the number of events related to the visual arts, with representatives of the primary art market.

6.2. Austrian Art World – Constructing international paradox

a. International Aspirations

The Austrian art market consistently shapes Vienna's image as an international centre for contemporary art and a cultural bridge between Western and Eastern Europe. Official materials from one of the most important art fairs in Vienna – *viennacontemporary* – present the fair as a leading platform for CEE markets, emphasising its international nature, the participation of galleries from neighbouring countries, the presence of international collectors, and the importance of strengthening regional networks. This self-presentation provides a strategic framework for cultural policy and reinforces Vienna's image as a city that attracts international collectors, gallery owners, and fair participants

The terms ‘international enclave’ and ‘cultural hub’ are frequently employed on the official websites of Austrian ministries and institutions, as well as in official statements and documents, becoming almost a narrative. For instance, in the document BMEIA Basic Principles, Key Areas and Programmes, Vienna is referred to as ‘a hub for intercultural dialogue’ (BMEIA 2021, 20), and the official cultural strategy until 2030 begins with the clear statement ‘Vienna is a cultural metropolis’^{32 33}. According to contemporary art publications and analytical publications, Vienna has become a ‘city making international waves’³⁴ in recent years, becoming increasingly visible on the map of global art processes, attracting both art professionals and tourists for whom cultural events are an important part of the city's image. However, does a favourable geographical location in itself suffice to create an international brand? Definitely not.

The concept of internationalism in the context of the art market is frequently analysed not only as a geographical characteristic but also as a socially and symbolically constructed category. Bourdieu's (1993) research demonstrates that the artistic domain is characterised by intricate power dynamics, recognition processes, and symbolic capital, which often deviate from the geographical ‘openness’ of the physical space. In this sense, internationalism can be seen as a mechanism that enables art institutions and market participants to enhance their legitimacy and status.

Contemporary art market theorists, such as Quemin (2013) and Velthuis (2015), have noted that international art fairs serve a dual function: on the one hand, they create a platform for the global exchange of works of art, and on the other, they consolidate local networks and structures, ensuring their visibility on the international stage. In summary, it can be posited that fairs serve to enhance

³² Stadt Wien. n.d.

³³ *Original German*: ‘Wien ist eine Kulturmetropole’

³⁴ Khalil 2023, Artsy.

the symbolic value of local participants whilst concomitantly integrating them into global processes. Moreover, the notion of ‘mobile space’ (Pratt 2008) underscores the assertion that international cultural practices are inextricably linked to their local contexts. Internationality is shown through a series of interconnected processes, including adaptation, interpretation, and interaction with specific local contexts. Exhibition formats, gallery participation, state support, and cultural diplomacy all contribute to the creation of a unique synthesis of the global and local.

Austrian policy documents do actively support the narrative of market internalisation. For example, the Austrian Government's Programme for 2025–2029 proposes reducing the VAT rate on the trade of works of art (Bundeskanzleramt 2025, 204), introducing tax breaks for purchasing works for public access and scientific purposes, and allowing up to 9% of the purchase price of a work of art to be written off (up to €20,000 per year). These initiatives should strengthen the competitiveness of the Austrian market and align it with the European standards. Horst Szaal, Deputy Chair of the Federal Committee of Art and Antiques Dealers, emphasised that these measures could provide a long-awaited breakthrough by supporting gallery owners, expanding the buyer base and strengthening transnational ties³⁵. Together with this, the new International Cultural Policy Concept dated 2023 declares, ‘Good international relations in art, culture and science, as well as dialogue provide added value to Austrian society. Art, culture and science need exchange’ (BMEIA 2023, 10).

Nevertheless, despite this discourse of openness and internationalism, the Viennese art market remains largely local. The structure, mechanisms of recognition, and distribution of the values of the latter often rely on local networks, institutions, and social relations, creating a complex dynamic between the ‘international’ as a symbolic resource and the ‘local’ as a practical field of action.

b. Local Realities

Despite international statements, the market's empirical reality remains predominantly local. Most gallery sales are made to a regular circle of local clients, and transaction volumes remain limited. Interviews conducted during field research confirm this, with gallery owners describing a ‘tiny Austrian art scene’, together with ‘very small number of collectors,’ and a weak influx of new collectors from outside the local area. This contrast is particularly noticeable in media commentary. For example, Artnet (2019) noted that *viennacontemporary* ‘remains a staid, regional fair’³⁶. Arterritory (2015) was even more blunt in words: Vienna dreams of being a centre, but still talks

³⁵ Wirtschaftskammer Österreich 2025.

³⁶ Elderton 2019, Artnet.

to itself, characterising the market as reproducing its own locality despite its international aspirations³⁷.

The problem lies far beyond the lack of local collectors. Interviews and fieldwork showed that the local aspect prevails in all the sectors of the art market: starting with the positioning of the country in the global art arena and finishing with the distribution of the funding:

Art and culture are inherent to the Austrian identity. They form the creative core of our country in its examination of the global perception of Austria, as well as internally. <...>

The aim of our international cultural activities is to establish and connect these creative professionals in the global arena (BMEIA 2023, 9) – says the cultural policy concept.

As posited in the statement, Austrian cultural policy is predicated on the utilisation of the art sector to provide additional value to Austrian society within the context of internationality. Thus, it can be concluded that the concepts of internationality can already be viewed symbolically. This emphasises the importance and value of the Austrian and local. A similar bias is evident in the selection of artists, with a preference for those representing the local environment. Notably, it is a prerequisite for artists to be either Austrian or to have permanent residence in Austria. And here, we see interesting turn: what is usually referred as local is not always that local. This is obviously true that the system is more oriented toward local connections than international ones. But, as gallerist 2 pointed: ‘Viennese art now, or Austrian art now, often includes migrant positions: art is based in Austria, or Austrian artists living abroad’ (Interview 16.07.2025). It shows the attempt to absorb the global background of an artist covering it up by Austrian residence, although exhibiting a painter with a non–Austrian background can give the program an ‘international touch’. However today, even being based in Austria does not always mean being included in the local context. The geo–political factor is always there:

I work with an artist [the name is hidden]. She has a disadvantage because she is Russian. It’s not her fault. She has been here for 12 years. I am sure she has a little bit of a disadvantage now, even though she works with Ukrainian people and so on. Because of her background in Russia, she cannot receive an art prize at the moment, for example, even though she has Austrian citizenship. Because it is going to be this **Russian** artist, **Russian–born** artist, now living in Austria. She will always be a Russian artist (Interview 16.07.2025).

³⁷ Gludowacz 2015, Arterritory.

However, there are always exclusions, like the case of Vera Klimentieva, an artist from Moscow with Austrian residence, represented at *SPARK Art Fair Vienna 2025* by a Swiss gallery, who won the *wien-Live Award for 'The best emerging Vienna-based position'*.

The other issue lies in the area of provided financial support. Even here, there is a tendency to fund Austrian artists, even though the gallery itself is already Austrian:

If I want to get this money, I am obliged to have at least a big number of artists coming from Vienna or being connected to Vienna or Austria [said one of the international gallerists]. But the support should go to the galleries without the restriction of putting there the local label (Interview 23.10.2025).

In this context, local artists may be valued more highly than their international counterparts, as they are integrated into existing support networks, institutional expectations and cultural hierarchies. For galleries, having Austrian artists in their portfolio is not only a matter of representation, but also a strategic resource: the more local positions they represent, the higher their chances of receiving subsidies and institutional support, and the less need they have to compete for recognition exclusively through the international market: 'individuals are not forced anymore to give their best because they get the public money anyway if they just enter the system' (Interview 11.07.2025). Thus, galleries are forced to constantly balance between a global regime of value, where internationalism functions as symbolic capital, and a local regime, where national affiliation and embeddedness in the local field provide stability and access to resources. In Graeber's terms (2001), it is not simply a question of the distribution of value, but of a political struggle for the right to determine which forms of artistic production and which trajectories of recognition are considered significant in a particular social and institutional context. The gallerists explain that this system leads only to a lack of quality of art pieces, as to access public money, you just need to have as many Austrian painters as possible: 'If you have, let us say, most of your artists are from Austria and the colleagues have this as well, you are not questioning your system' (Interview 23.10.2025).

Big attempts to become part of the global art world often attract criticism from local players, particularly when practices or government subsidies focus on providing access to the global art scene. For example, in 2023, the BMKÖS announced an increase in subsidies for Austrian galleries to participate in art fairs abroad, known as '*Auslandsmesseförderung*'. The budget for this purpose was thus increased to 420 thousand euros, up from 370 thousand euros previously. According to the statement, 'funding is provided for participation in renowned fairs such as ARCO Madrid, Art Brussels, Armory Show New York, Art Cologne, Art Basel, and Frieze Art Fair London, as well as

“off-fairs”. More than 50 galleries with up to 100 trade fair appearances by artists will benefit from this program³⁸. The maximum funding per submitting gallery was €20,000.

According to Andrea Mayer, the Secretary of State for Culture, this decision was motivated by the desire to provide local visual arts greater visibility on the international stage³⁹. The tribute was also published on the official website of the Austrian Union of Galleries. However, this decision has attracted criticism. In an article published by Die Presse, Markus Huber, the VC managing director, expressed his disagreement with the financing policy of the contemporary art sector in Vienna⁴⁰. The result has been an increase in the active encouragement and financing of Austrian galleries to participate in international fairs, while local art fairs remain neglected and subsidised by the authorities. However, these measurements were insufficient. The overall risk associated with participating in international fairs still appears to be considerably greater than that associated with local support infrastructure. Art dealer Louis Wienerroither⁴¹ emphasised this point:

Participation in TEFAF in New York costs €100,000, and there have been fairs where we have not sold anything. We represent Austrian art abroad, but the support system does not take us into account⁴².

Although one of my respondents does not see this as a major problem. He criticises the local art scene, stating that focus only on local mechanisms, increasingly leads the Austrian art scene further away from the global art market:

Most of the market what is produced and what is also shown is not my cup of tea, but a society without competition at the end is stagnation, it is a lack of quality. <...> If a local artist does not have this kind of attempt to be international, to be in another competition in general, then it is a problem’ (Interview 23.10.2025).

Thus, there is a significant discrepancy between international ambitions and local realities, setting Vienna in an ‘international paradox’. Vienna strives for the status of an interregional hub, as evidenced by its rhetoric, institutional documents and political programs. However, everyday processes such as low demand, a limited circle of buyers, a high tax burden, and insufficient support for international travel and participation in trade fairs keep the market within the confines

³⁸ Österreichische Galerienverband n.d.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Komarek 2024, Die Presse.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² *Original German*: Eine Teilnahme an der Tefaf New York kostet mich rund 100.000 Euro und es gab schon Messen, bei denen wir nichts verkauft haben..

of the locality. This disproportion – the growing divergence between global aspirations and local realities – is an expression of broader crisis dynamics in the art world at the Austrian level. This is the paradox of internationalism – a symptom of a local crisis.

6.3. The Role of Art Fairs in Vienna's International Positioning

'We have one problem in Vienna – we have too many art fairs,' said gallerist 2 to whom I spoke during my field research in July. Indeed, the situation with art fairs in Vienna is far from simple and requires careful consideration.

The academic literature clearly distinguishes between local and international art exhibitions. As Rodner and Thomson (2013) state, local fairs tend to provide what is known as a 'low level of art validation' (Rodner and Thomson 2013, 12). These fairs are designed for artists who are just starting and seeking visibility in a professional environment or for those who, for various reasons, occupy more marginal positions within the art world hierarchy. In contrast, international fairs provide a high level of validation, primarily in the form of cultural and professional recognition rather than financial gain. Perhaps this is why the '*good art fairs*' (as my interlocutor called them) strive to position themselves as 'international.' When I asked gallerist 3 to elaborate on the term 'international art fairs', this person was precise and short: 'It's interchange, exchange of values and of dialogue. This is crucial' (Interview 23.10.2025).

The notion of an 'international' art fair, in the context of both the Viennese and global art markets, is not limited to the presence of participants from different countries. It also encompasses the strategic goals of the organisers and the social and economic functions of the fair for galleries, artists, and collectors. In Alain Quemin's article '*How International Are International Contemporary Art Fairs?*' (2013), it is shown that the concept of 'internationality', which is actively employed by contemporary art fairs, is less an objective indicator of participant diversity and more of a symbolic resource. Quemin emphasises that fairs use the label of globality to highlight their own significance, attract the international professional community, and secure for themselves the status of relevant and influential institutions (Quemin 2013, 169)

For galleries, participation in such events serves several key purposes. All my informants named the commercial perspective – the opportunity to sell art and expand the client base – as the first reason. Second, participating in an international fair is seen as a marker of status and recognition, which influences the gallery's positioning within both the local and global art fields. Third, being present at fairs encourage the integration of local art practices into global processes and the exchange of cultural expertise, which is especially important for Viennese galleries striving to strengthen their international reputation. This point is important to emphasise because a gallery's

rootedness in the local environment – their connections, trust from the professional community, and established reputation – does not contradict their participation in international art networks; on the contrary, it serves as the foundation for such involvement (Velthuis 2013, 302). ‘There are only two art fairs in Austria that consider themselves more international’, explains gallerist 2 during our conversation, meaning *viennacontemporary* and *SPARK Art Fair Vienna*, ‘you will never get a good art gallery in Vienna except at these two’ (Interview 16.07.2025). Here, the local is not an alternative to the global, but rather its prerequisite: Only by being recognised and reliable participants in their city or national context can galleries claim inclusion in international distribution channels and symbolic recognition.

Government and local cultural institutions typically support international art events, such as fairs, for economic and cultural reasons. This funding and institutional backing not only promote a city as a cultural hub but also enhance its international image by creating conditions that attract tourists, art professionals and art investments. International art fairs are usually held in cities that gain additional cultural value by hosting such events as the popularity of the fair grows. Such events can be seen as a continuation of world exhibitions, which were originally designed to showcase countries’ achievements and promote international trade. In Vienna, though, a lot of art fairs events rely on short-term sponsorship budgets or fluctuations in managerial oversight. This hinders the development of a stable international reputation and sales expansion.

Consequently, international art fairs function as commercial platforms, instruments of symbolic capital and components of strategic cultural branding. However, in Vienna’s case, its impact remains predominantly local, with the festival acting more as a Viennese art festival than an international art event. As was sarcastically noted by one of my informants: ‘In each city we have a certain local attitude and self-referential system where people are happy if they can clap on their own shoulders. <...> I personally believe that Vienna does not deserve more than one fair’ (Interview 23.10.2025). And there are possible the reasons why.

The primary art fairs comprise *viennacontemporary* and *SPARK Art Fair Vienna*. In my interview, the gallery owner asserted that they were the only events of true significance in the city’s artistic calendar:

It’s only Spark [*SPARK Art Fair Vienna*] and *viennacontemporary* that are battling each other, that are like considered **the good art fairs**, and then there’s a lot of art fairs that target art trade [Kunsthandel], which is a different sphere from galleries. There are traders and galleries, and they have a separate approach towards selling art (Interview 16.07.2025).

The nexus of these events is characterised by the leading role of Renger van den Heuvel, the founder, driving force and managing director of these fairs⁴³. However, he has left both projects in recent years. This coincided with a series of scandals related, in particular, to the *SPARK Art Fair Vienna*, and sparked public debate⁴⁴. *viennacontemporary* (formerly VIENNAFAIR) has changed its format and management, suggesting that the event infrastructure is not particularly stable. *viennacontemporary*, for instance, has undergone a restructuring and rebranding process, transforming from a commercial platform into a non-profit organisation due to the geopolitical situation (as the owner was Dmitry Aksenov, Russian Chairman of the RDI Group board). This strategic move aims to secure state support and reposition institutions on the global stage.

Are International Art Fairs Truly International?

An analysis of specific cases confirms that ‘internationalism’ often takes on a mixed, performative character. For example, at the 2023 *viennacontemporary*, the ratio of international to Austrian galleries was 56% to 44%, with only two galleries among the international participants representing the Baltic countries⁴⁵. In 2024, at the tenth anniversary fair, there were 98 galleries and 6 institutions from 24 countries: 43 Austrian, 33 from Eastern Europe, and 22 from the rest of the world⁴⁶. At the same time, a third of the participants remained Austrian, another third Eastern European, and the remaining part, although labelled as international, mostly represented Europe⁴⁷. A comparison with other fairs, such as ART Vienna, shows a similar dynamic. Despite being advertised as featuring ‘Austrian and international galleries’, a significant portion of exhibitors remains local⁴⁸. Even *viennacontemporary* fair with ambitions focused on Eastern and Central Europe in earlier editions demonstrated the dominance of Austrian and German participants: the article in *Arterritory* highlights that in 2017 there were about 40 Austrian galleries, 20 German galleries, with participation from other countries being less noticeable⁴⁹. Thus, internationality often turns out not to be an absolute characteristic of the exhibitors but rather a rhetorical tool that affirms the status of the fair and its participants within the local scene. This practice is entirely consistent with the theories of symbolic capital and performative internationality. Perczel (2025) shows that for artists from Central and Eastern Europe, global institutions and venues become a strategic tool for consecration. Participation in fairs with an international brand increases the chances of recognition in the global art field, even if the actual market presence remains regional.

⁴³ Komarek 2023, *Die Presse*.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Čivle 2023, *Arterritory*.

⁴⁶ *viennacontemporary* 2025, Press information.

⁴⁷ Adam 2024, *The Art Newspaper*.

⁴⁸ ART Vienna, n.d.

⁴⁹ Čivle 2017, *Arterritory*.

Main factors limiting the internationalization of Vienna's art fairs

Summarising the data obtained during field research – which included visits to the art fairs themselves, conducting formal and informal interviews, and analysing materials from secondary sources – I identified five key factors that were systematically mentioned by respondents and representatives of the art community. These factors help explain why Vienna's art fairs are difficult to call fully international and why they remain far from the level of internationalisation characteristic of leading European art venues.

1. The absence of a strong base of local buyers and collectors of international art

All respondents – both gallerists and art market participants – emphasised the lack of a stable group of collectors in Vienna focused on international contemporary art. Media sources and interviews confirm that Austria essentially lacks a community of significant private collectors who could provide a stable market for international galleries. Consequently, Austria is perceived as an insufficiently attractive platform for international participants: the market is small, demand is limited, and the presence of potential buyers is unpredictable. A gallerist 1: 'A lot of international galleries are not very happy. <...> they would not come back to Vienna because they come once or twice, they see the clients and they miss the clients that why should they continue to spend their money?' (Interview 11.06.2025).

2. The inability of fairs to meet the professional needs of galleries and weak organizational infrastructure

The second key factor hindering the internationalisation of Vienna's art fairs is the mismatch between their organizational structure and the professional expectations and needs of the galleries. Nearly all respondents interviewed emphasised that the current model of fairs in Vienna does not provide the proper conditions for the stable operation of international participants in the art market. Problems were also noted on the financial side: most participants stressed that sales at Vienna's fairs typically remain low and do not allow them to recoup their participation costs. Taken together, organizational instability and economic inefficiency create a sense of risk and uncertainty among international galleries.

Infrastructure issues deserve special attention. Respondents repeatedly criticised the constant change of fair locations, which creates a sense of instability and hinders the formation of a recognisable brand, as is the case with established European fairs. Gallerist 2 compared the situation to the long-standing and well-established ARCO Madrid fair, which has been held at the same location for decades: 'The Austrian art scene is very confusing. We do not have good fairs, we do not have stability, and we do not have orientation for customers' (Interview 16.07.2025). In

the words, what happens in Vienna with the constant shuffling of venues looks unserious and disorients the participants. Gallerist 3 added to this thought, emphasising that ‘if you deliver a platform and you cannot feed the needs of the ones who are your clients, that means the galleries, then it cannot develop’ (Interview 23.10.2025).

Thus, inadequate organisation, weak institutional stability, the absence of permanent infrastructure, and the inability to provide adequate conditions for galleries result in Vienna’s art fairs being perceived by international participants as an unreliable and unpredictable platform. This significantly reduces their appeal and limits their potential for internationalisation.

3. *The problem of a stable audience and the ambiguous assessments of the local public’s level of ‘education level’*

The third aspect was internally contradictory. Thus, international gallerists, especially those from Southern European countries (for example, Spain and Portugal), held a rather high opinion of the erudition and interest of the Viennese public in contemporary art. In private conversations, they noted that, compared to their own countries, Vienna demonstrated much more active gallery attendance and greater interest in art. For example, a Portuguese gallerist emphasized that in her country low attendance and a weak interest from the general audience are a major problem, and compared to Vienna, the situation is *‘like night and day.’* However, local gallerists paint a less optimistic picture of the art market. For them, the key problem is the insufficient level of visual literacy among audiences. As one respondent stressed: ‘If the local clients are not ready, this is not a matter of money, it’s a matter of educational level. People are not educated in the visual arts. It’s something which needs time, which needs also background’. Thus, the level of awareness and engagement of the public is subject to interpretations that differ significantly depending on the observer’s perspective – local or international.

4. *Lack of international experts and weak integration of professional practices*

The next factor is related to the fairs’ institutional structure. Despite certain international elements, such as the past participation of international owners or investors, the curators, directors, and managers of the leading Viennese fairs are predominantly Austrian. This creates a closed professional environment in which the practice of inviting international curators, consultants, or art managers is virtually nonexistent.

Gallerists repeatedly emphasised that the lack of international experts hinders the development of professional exchange and reduces the fairs’ potential for internationalisation. Gallerist 1

expressed this idea very clearly: ‘If you want to play on an international level, first of all you have to invite professionals’ (Interview 11.07.2025).

Furthermore, in interviews and through media representation, comparisons were frequently drawn between the state’s approach to the musical sphere and the visual arts. It was emphasised that in music, Austria actively attracts world-class specialists, conductors, and performers, whereas similar mechanisms are practically absent in the visual arts. Gallerist 3 used compared the situation to a malfunctioning dishwasher:

If your dishwasher is not working and it is from this country, of course you buy the dishwasher of the next country which works, is not it? It has nothing to do with being patriotic, sorry, but when this is bullshit, I will spend money on something which works (Interview 23.10.2025).

This metaphor was used to criticise excessive patriotism in the selection of professionals and projects, where effective international solutions are disregarded in favour of local but less successful ones.

5. *Insufficient Involvement of Institutions and Museums*

The last key factor is the limited participation of major institutions in art fairs. Respondents mentioned that the only fair where the involvement of institutions was noticeable was *viennacontemporary*; however, even there, the presence of museums (such as MUMOK and other institutions) was largely symbolic and not necessarily practical. Gallerists noted that more active participation from museums, institutions, and major cultural actors could significantly change the status of Viennese art fairs, bringing institutional prestige, expanding the international audience, and increasing trust in international galleries.

Taken together, the five limiting factors mentioned above should not be viewed as separate or isolated problems. Rather, they represent different manifestations of a single structural mechanism: the reproduction of a locally closed art market. In this sense, Vienna's difficulties in achieving international significance are not the result of insufficient effort or inadequate branding, but rather a consequence of a structural logic in which internationalism functions primarily as a symbolic resource, while the practical conditions of the art world remain firmly rooted in the local sphere.

6.4. Conclusion

The analysis of the Viennese art market and the practices of art fairs shows that the term ‘international’ in the Austrian context functions more as a strategic and symbolic tool than as an objective characteristic of participants and galleries origins. Internationalism serves as a form of

symbolic capital: it allows local galleries, art fairs, and cultural institutions to demonstrate prestige, professionalism, and openness to the global art community, even if actual participation by international actors, movements of artworks, and audience composition are predominantly national.

In practice, Viennese fairs face several limitations that hinder their full internationalisation. Key factors include a weak base of local buyers and collectors of international art, underdeveloped organizational infrastructure of the fairs, a limited and heterogeneous audience, a shortage of international experts and specialists, and minimal involvement from major institutions and museums. Together, these aspects create a gap between the proclaimed international ambitions and local realities, resulting in fairs that remain largely oriented toward a local audience and restricted professional networks. It is especially significant that internationalism often serves as a rhetorical device that enhances the prestige of participants and fairs rather than as an absolute indicator of global reach or artistic value. Participation in fairs with an international brand helps galleries and artists strengthen their status and credibility at both national and international levels; however, the market structure, professional practices, and audience continue to remain local.

Based on these observations, I propose to consider art fairs as spaces in which the local and international dimensions of contemporary art are intertwined in a special way. These dimensions are not predetermined and do not exist as stable categories, but are formed and acquire meaning in the process of interaction between actors, institutions, and infrastructures. Here, internationality is not a universal quality of a work, but arises in relation to the local context; locality, in turn, is constantly redefined through reference to external artistic and market benchmarks. It is precisely this dialectic between the local and the international that sets the framework for analysing the processes of evaluation and legitimisation of art at international art fairs in Vienna.

In the next section, I analyse two case studies where I look at two art fairs where I conducted field research between March and September 2025: *viennacontemporary* and *SPARK Art Fair Vienna*. The analysis of these cases will provide a deeper understanding of the mechanisms by which ‘international’ is formed and its interaction with the local context of the Viennese art scene.

7. SPARK Art Fair Vienna

Having worked in the contemporary art world for several years after graduating from university with a degree in art history, I knew what it was like to be a stranger at such events. I felt uncomfortable returning to the art world empty-handed. I was not going to buy or sell anything. I was unfamiliar with most of the artists listed as participants. I felt like a stranger who had decided to sneak into a ballroom full of elite people. I felt completely out of place in this environment. As I approached the venue, my anxiety increased. It was in the large Marx Halle in the third district of Vienna. This place usually hosts large-scale events of various formats, such as conferences, fairs, and exhibitions. As I approached the entrance, I fought the urge to turn around and leave and looked around. The first thing that caught my eye was the large number of black BMWs parked beside the building. Employees in black suits, white ironed shirts, and neatly styled hair walked back and forth on a wide red carpet. The atmosphere was like that of a private event. I set aside my last doubts and entered. To the left of the entrance was a registration desk with seven employees, none of whom paid me any attention whatsoever. I held my way in.

7.1. Introduction: SPARK Art Fair and its place in the Viennese art scene

SPARK Art Fair Vienna is one of the city's key art fairs and occupies a significant position in Vienna's institutional contemporary art ecosystem. Since its establishment in 2021, the fair has positioned itself as an international platform for local and international gallery owners and art dealers. Although one of the planned editions did not take place in 2023, the project resumed in subsequent years and continues to be a regular fixture in the city's cultural calendar⁵⁰. This contributes to stabilising market expectations and forming professional mobility rhythms, as well as consolidating certain actors – primarily gallery owners and art dealers – in the art market. Prior to SPARK's establishment, the leading international contemporary art fair in Vienna was VIENNAFAIR, which underwent institutional and branding rethinking to become *viennacontemporary* in 2019⁵¹. As the conceptual founder and producer of the *SPARK Art Fair Vienna*, Renger van den Heuvel previously held a leadership position at the *viennacontemporary*. This allows us to view *SPARK Art Fair Vienna* not as an isolated initiative but as the result of accumulated institutional experience and a rethinking of existing art fair models.

Van den Heuvel's strategic vision of the European art market formed the basis for *SPARK Art Fair Vienna*'s unique format of solo presentations. In this respect, the fair is conceptually similar to the Art Berlin Contemporary (ABC) model, which ran from 2008 to 2016 and also featured individual

⁵⁰ SPARK Art Fair Vienna n.d.

⁵¹ Bradley 2021, Artnet.

artist presentations⁵². This structure means that each gallery represents one artist, creating a more curatorially structured exhibition space and reflecting certain symbolic strategies for representing artistic value. From a theoretical perspective, fairs are often considered spaces in which participants' status positions are formed and constructed (Velthuis 2013; Becker 1982). As contemporary art fairs are specific 'valuation arenas' in which notions of artistic quality, significance, and market potential are formed and solidified (Pettersen 2014; Quemin 2013), this representation model contributes to the accumulation of symbolic capital around a single artistic name, thereby strengthening its position within the art world hierarchy (Bourdieu 1993). Additionally, the spatial organisation of the stand mirrors institutional exhibition formats, symbolically bringing commercial presentations closer to the museum context (Belting 2003; Bennett 1995).

The format of solo presentations can be interpreted as a marketing strategy that strengthens the individual artistic identity of the artist and simplifies the evaluation process for collectors, curators, and institutional buyers. By focusing on a single artist, competitive fragmentation within the stand is reduced, the effects of scarcity and symbolic selectivity are enhanced, and a more holistic perception of artistic practice is achieved. This, in turn, influences pricing mechanisms and market valuations (Lee and Lee 2016, 95–106). In this sense, the *SPARK Art Fair Vienna* curatorial structure simultaneously performs an economic function, managing attention and concentrating value within the fair space.

The exhibition space is organised according to the principle of equal space allocation: despite the existence of a selection committee, each participant is allocated a stand of the same size, constructed using a standardised modular system. This self-sufficient architectural mechanism levels the visual hierarchy, forming a neutral yet professionally calibrated space for presenting artistic work. This reflects the fact that the fair itself strives for equal representation and reduced competitive asymmetry between participants⁵³. This organisation of space is consistent with valuation study concepts: fair space becomes an arena not just for trade, but also for the formation of collective assessments of artistic value through architectural and institutional decisions (Muniesa, Millo & Callon 2007).

From a cultural market sociological perspective, this type of spatial organisation modifies traditional evaluation and exchange mechanisms: identical stands and modular architecture act as technological mechanisms that reduce uncertainty in the market for unique art objects

⁵² Bradley 2021, Artnet.

⁵³ SPARK Art Fair Vienna n.d.

(Beckert 1982), while creating a more ‘democratic’ exhibition environment. In this environment, the attention of participants’ and visitors’ shifts from competing for visual dominance to a comparable, curatorially calibrated perception of artistic practices. This format corresponds to empirical data from the interviews. As gallerist 2 noted, the high professional level of selection and the unified visual structure of the stands distinguish this fair from less curatorially organised forums, allowing a clearer standard of quality to be established (Interview 20.06.2025).

The exhibition takes place in an industrial space – Marx Halle, a large 19th-century exhibition hall with an open structure of columns and beams, adapted for a wide range of events⁵⁴. However, Marx Halle is not only an architectural stage but also a significant institutional indicator of the fair's stability. Some interview participants noted that constantly changing venues could negatively affect the prestige of the event and how its institutional weight is perceived. A striking example of this is the comparison with the *viennacontemporary* fair, which, despite its connection to the same venue, decided not to hold its 2021 edition at Marx Halle, citing a desire to avoid duplication with another similar event in the same season and to enable galleries to allocate their resources optimally⁵⁵.

Thus, the role of MARX HALLE within the *SPARK Art Fair Vienna* context is twofold: it serves as both a physical stage and an environment of institutional representation, influencing the perception, trust, and market strategies of those within the art scene. The industrial character of the venue and its architectural features influence how cultural values are articulated, visualised, and evaluated. A stable presence in this space also strengthens social and professional networks, which are essential resources in the international art market. The fair goes beyond gallery presentations to include public discussions, artist talks, performances, and other related events. These elements broaden the fair's functional scope, transforming it from a space for commercial exchange into a broader cultural forum where artistic practices are discussed, interpreted, and situated within current professional and social contexts.

This chapter examines the *SPARK Art Fair Vienna* as a significant element in the Austrian art market. This analysis aims to demonstrate how this platform balances local specialisation with the pursuit of international visibility and how its activities are affected by crises, technological transformations, and institutional constraints.

⁵⁴ Marx Halle n.d.

⁵⁵ Huber 2021, *Kurier*.

7.2. Institutional dynamics of SPARK Art Fair Vienna (2021–2024): the field, factions, and the struggle for legitimacy

Launching the *SPARK Art Fair Vienna* in 2021 came with several risks and challenges. Holding a new international fair amid ongoing pandemic-related restrictions created serious obstacles for international galleries wishing to participate. Consequently, many international participants were forced to withdraw from the first edition of the fair⁵⁶. Nevertheless, significant players in the Viennese art market, such as Galerie Krinzinger, Sophie Tappeiner, and Georg Kargl Fine Arts, supported the initiative and participated in the inaugural *SPARK Art Fair Vienna*. Their participation reinforced the event's institutional significance and confirmed its ambitions at the local and regional levels.

Interviews with gallery owners revealed that in the Austrian context the presence of prestigious galleries is extremely important for the fair's image. This creates an interesting cycle: the status of a participating gallery enhances the prestige of the event, while gallery owners need to consider the fair's reputation so that their participation does not damage their own gallery's image. As gallerist 2 noted: 'If the fair does not live up to expectations, participation can have a negative impact on our reputation because we are associated with this event' (Interview, 20.07.2025). In the Austrian market, where new and experimental work is often met with caution and reluctance, the participation of respected galleries in the first *SPARK Art Fair Vienna* edition signalled significant trust and a willingness to take risks in the art market.

Simultaneously, doubts arose regarding the necessity of introducing another major art fair to Vienna's cultural landscape. In a few interviews, gallerists noted that Vienna is a relatively small city and that Austria has a limited art market. This raises the question of whether it is advisable to concentrate so many fairs in such a small area. The key topics of discussion were the demand from the public and collectors and the threat of upsetting the balance of the art market ecosystem by diluting its quality.

The emergence of the *SPARK Art Fair Vienna* can be analysed using Pierre Bourdieu's theory of the artistic field. In *The Field of Cultural Production*, Bourdieu describes this field as a space 'structured by a field of positions and position-takings' (Bourdieu 1993, 30), in which agents compete for control over legitimacy, the distribution of capital, and the ability to determine what constitutes art itself. The emergence of the *SPARK Art Fair Vienna* inevitably provoked a 'struggle between factions' as the new institution attempted to establish itself within an already well-defined

⁵⁶ Bradley 2021, Artnet.

configuration of forces. Bourdieu emphasises that in the artistic field, every new contender is forced either to agree to the rules of the game or to try to change them (Bourdieu 1993). *SPARK Art Fair Vienna* approach reflects the latter strategy: the fair established its own model of sectioning, curating, and gallery representation, seeking to alter the distribution of symbolic capital within the Viennese art scene. This inevitably created conflict with existing institutions that already held positions of power, primarily the *viennacontemporary*.

Scepticism about *SPARK Art Fair Vienna* was also evident in several professional and media reports. For example, the article ‘*A buzzy new art fair that’s taking Vienna by storm*’ (2021) on Artnet raised the issue of a possible conflict of interest between the new fair and the existing *viennacontemporary*⁵⁷. The author pointed out that *VIENNAFAIR* had effectively disappeared under pressure from the more modern and ambitious *viennacontemporary* project, and that a similar fate could await *SPARK Art Fair Vienna*⁵⁸. This media discourse illustrates well what Hal Foster (2015) describes as the ‘regime of criticism’ in the context of the ‘emergency of contemporary art’. Institutions and projects are immediately subjected to public evaluation and scrutiny, and any initiative is viewed through the prism of crisis, institutional tension, and structural instability in the art world. This logic is evident in the case of *SPARK Art Fair Vienna*, where any instability is automatically interpreted as a sign of institutional failure. In this sense, the emergence of the *SPARK Art Fair Vienna* reflects not only competition between individual fair projects but also between different organisational models of the contemporary art market in Vienna.

Against this backdrop, *SPARK Art Fair Vienna* has also faced criticism from the media and professional communities. A *Die Presse* publication (2023) questioned the validity and sustainability of this initiative in the context of a saturated market and competition between institutions⁵⁹. The discussion focused on two things: the artistic level of the fair and its ability to occupy a stable niche in the international and local art infrastructure⁶⁰. Despite its brevity, the article received widespread attention and marked a turning point in the public perception of the *SPARK Art Fair Vienna*. Following the publication, the 2023 fair was officially postponed to 2024, and the organisers explained it as the consequence of ‘obvious conflicts of interest within the Viennese art scene, in which SPARK has been increasingly implicated’⁶¹; however, in professional

⁵⁷ Bradley 2021, Artnet.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Vogel 2023, *Die Presse*.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ GalleriesNow 2023.

circles and media discussions, this postponement was perceived as effectively cancelling the next edition.

Based on its tone and argumentation, this article expresses disappointment with SPARK's original ambitions. The journalist began by expressing disappointment: 'Everything seemed so perfect. With the SPARK Art Fair in the Marx Halle, Vienna finally had an art fair that was truly about art again'⁶²⁶³. The text then reveals a crisis in the project. Focus is given to the departure of the managing director of the fair at a vital moment, while preparations were underway for the next edition. According to the author, this departure triggered a domino effect that became the catalyst for the fair's institutional crisis⁶⁴.

The author also criticises the composition of the participants, highlighting the absence of leading Austrian galleries from the *SPARK Art Fair Vienna 2023* list. This led to the view that the exhibition had lost touch with the local art ecosystem and prioritised international galleries. The text also stated that 'many' (without specifying names) gallery owners had refused participation up to three times. Furthermore, there were reports of difficulties in negotiations and galleries being left in a 'state of limbo' due to a lack of answers resulting from management changes in the department. The fair's pricing policy also provoked mixed reactions. Participation in *SPARK Art Fair Vienna* cost €5,600 per stand in 2022–23, which some participants, especially given organisational instability, considered too high⁶⁵. Negative publicity and uncertainty about the situation have reportedly caused serious tension among participants and potential participants in the Fair. *Kurier* reported cases of verbal abuse directed at *SPARK Art Fair Vienna* employees in 2023⁶⁶. According to the publication, verbal attacks against FAIR employees occurred among more than 60 registered and potential participants in the study. The article also referred to a crisis 'behind the scenes' at the fair in 2022–23⁶⁷.

Taken together, these elements – media criticism, institutional competition, and attempts to redistribute positions within the field – confirm Bourdieu's portrayal of the artistic field as a space of struggle. In this space, each institution must prove its legitimacy anew, and every mistake can instantly become a discursive resource in the struggle for power.

⁶² *Original German*: Alles schien so perfekt: Mit der Spark Art Fair in der Marx–Halle hatte Wien endlich wieder eine Kunstmesse, bei der es tatsächlich um Kunst ging.

⁶³ Vogel 2023, *Die Presse*.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Huber 2023, *Kurier*.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

However, in an interview conducted as part of the field research, one Viennese gallery owner spoke positively about the *SPARK Art Fair*, ranking it alongside the *viennacontemporary* as one of the few worthwhile art fairs in Vienna. All interviews emphasised the structural problem of an oversupply of fairs in the Austrian capital, where the market and institutions do not always have time to adapt to their number, rather than the weakness of specific initiatives. This opinion echoes that of French curator and critic Emmanuel Laura, quoted in an article in the *Die Presse*, who noted signs of institutional fatigue and pointed to recurring trends in the art markets of smaller European capitals⁶⁸.

7.3. SPARK Art Fair Vienna 2025: Local and international as opposing positioning strategies

At the start of the fair, I was greeted by a large canvas depicting a 19th-century crowd talking and drinking coffee. Behind it were the tables of a small cafeteria, where several people sat and slowly sipped their coffee. Having familiarised myself with the fair's curatorial concept in advance – based on solo presentations by each participating artist – I expected to see the artists themselves sitting near their booths.

I looked around. The space was filled with various booths displaying works of art, including paintings, installations and video art. Each booth had a small table with someone seated at a computer. There were almost no visitors to this site. 'It's Friday, around noon', I thought. 'People are just working; no wonder it's so empty.' I decided to look around and walked along the exhibition space. Each wall had the name of the artist and gallery. Some gallery owners seemed immersed in their laptops, showing little interest in casual visitors to the gallery. Others, in contrast, walked back and forth along their booths as if waiting for a potential buyer.

'Can I help you find something specific?' A woman's voice rang out from behind me as I was engrossed in watching a video installation by an English artist. 'Can you tell me more about the work?' I smiled back at the dark-haired woman, who looked to be about 40. She enthusiastically told me about the concept behind the work, which focuses on the routine nature of our daily tasks, as well as the idea that today's collectors pay for the concept rather than the form. 'This piece is £3,500, and this one is £4,000,' she said. 'I must have looked too interested,' I concluded to myself, 'since she offered to sell me these pieces.' I nodded and said goodbye to her. I was a little taken aback by her assertiveness and did not know what to ask her. All I could think of during our conversation was how often this artist had exhibited in Vienna. 'Yes, this is not his first time,' she

⁶⁸ Vogel 2023, *Die Presse*.

replied confidently, ‘he also exhibits in Paris, for example at the Pompidou Museum, and in London.’ A proper ‘newcomer’, I thought sarcastically.

7.3.1. *The context of the return in 2025: Reputational expectations and market tension*

The *SPARK Art Fair Vienna* took place from 21 to 23 March 2025 at the MARX HALLE exhibition space in Vienna. With 89 galleries from 19 countries in attendance, the organisers re-established the fair as an international platform for contemporary art. In this sense, fairs can be viewed as a unique type of art world space (Becker 1982), where symbolic, social, and economic capital (Bourdieu 1986) are transformed into one another through processes of selection, visibility, and recognition. The fair functions not only as a market but also as a space for spacemaking, where the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, as well as the hierarchies of access to professional resources and reputational capital, are established.

In quantitative terms, 2025 was a record year for SPARK: the fair was visited by approximately 22,000 people over three days, one of the highest attendance levels in the event's history, as reflected in Artnet News's press information⁶⁹. However, this total figure does not negate the fact that the MARX HALLE space was noticeably uncrowded on the first day, indicating an uneven attendance distribution over time and across the fair's program segments. At the same time, this overall figure does not rule out the fact that on the first day, the MARX HALLE space remained noticeably sparsely populated, which suggests that attendance was unevenly distributed over time and across the fair's program segments. For a medium-sized fair with a curated contemporary art format, this level of attendance is considered successful from an institutional perspective.

From a comparative perspective, this number is significant in the context of Austrian art fairs. For example, *viennacontemporary*, one of the largest international art fairs in Austria, attracted approximately 15,000 visitors over the four days of its 2025 program, according to the official press information document⁷⁰. Another example is *Fair For Art Vienna*, held over ten days, which was projected to attract around 12,500 visitors in 2025⁷¹. Such a comparison raises questions about the meaning of ‘success’ in absolute numbers: for *SPARK Art Fair Vienna*, a high total attendance indicates growing interest in contemporary art in Vienna, but at the same time, it does not negate the observable dynamics within the fair itself—specifically, the discrete concentration of visitors and the instability of engagement from the local audience. However, observations made on the first day of the fair revealed noticeable tension between reputational expectations and the actual dynamics of the space. Despite public statements from the curatorial team about the desire to create

⁶⁹ Artnet Gallery Network 2025.

⁷⁰ *viennacontemporary* n.d.

⁷¹ Online-Redaktion News.at 2025.

a ‘symbiosis’ with the local audience, which usually does not attend such events, the exhibition hall remained almost empty on opening day, and the situation did not significantly change in the afternoon. A gallerist representing a gallery from Porto (Portugal) noted that although Vienna is typically seen as a city with a developed exhibition culture, art fairs do not always attract sustained interest from the general audience (Interview 21.03.2025). She also drew a comparison with the Portuguese context, where, according to her, visiting exhibitions and galleries is not a widespread cultural practice. This observation points to a structural contradiction between the symbolic representation of the fair as an open cultural space and its actual functioning as a semi-closed professional field. The overall atmosphere of the event intensified the sense of structural boundaries and social stratification in the art world. The fair’s space – from the display of sponsor vehicles at the entrance to ritualised forms of communication between collectors and gallery owners – reproduced a logic in which participants recognised ‘their own’ and operated within implicit rules of access. These observations align with the concept of gatekeeping, which describes the mechanisms that control entry into the art field. Access to the art world here becomes possible only with capital valued by its participants: professional knowledge, social connections and institutional influence (Plattner 1998). While art fairs are often presented as democratic platforms for new names, they continue to reproduce the hierarchical and elitist nature of the art field. Visitor attention was unevenly distributed. By the end of the day, attention had concentrated around the booth of a Russian artist, which drew a noticeable crowd to it. The following day, booths featuring artists from Spain and Uganda were successful. This episode demonstrates how localised nodes of intensive visibility are formed within fair space, where institutional recognition, public attention, and reputational capital temporarily concentrate around specific artistic positions. This concentration highlights the fragmented nature of the fair as a space where opportunities for representation and recognition are unevenly distributed.

7.3.2. Local and International Galleries: Branding ‘Locality’ and ‘Internationality’

According to Curioni, Forti, and Leone (2015), the international nature of art fairs indicates as a managed process in which traditional gatekeepers control the upper segment of the market. They emphasise that despite signs of globalisation and the appearance of new scenes, ‘the demographic and geographic dynamics of the upper market segment remain stable and strictly controlled by established structures’ (Curioni *et al.* 2015, 75). Similarly, Quemin and Hest (2015) argue that success in the global art market is determined by integration into Western art capitals, which maintains the structural advantage of Europe, the USA, and the United Kingdom. In terms of participant geography, the 2025 fair was primarily represented by Viennese and German galleries (Berlin and Cologne). Nonetheless, the composition of the participants was truly international. As

Quemin points out, ‘the national diversity of exhibiting galleries is usually a good indicator of the quality of an art fair, which... should welcome galleries from a wide range of countries, especially leading galleries from the largest art markets (USA, Germany, UK, Switzerland, France, Italy)’ (Quemin 2013, 5). It should be noted that the fair is mainly focused on the European region, with a few exceptions: Latin America was represented by two galleries from Brazil, Africa by one gallery from Uganda and one from South Africa, and the Middle East by a gallery from Abu Dhabi. The national distribution of artists was broader than that of galleries. Nevertheless, the leading positions in terms of the number of galleries and represented artists were almost identical: Austria, Germany, the USA, and Turkey. The 2025 participant list shows marked genre and geographic diversity: painting, photography, mixed media, media art, and performance art. Local galleries (Viennese and Austrian) can rely on their knowledge of the local context, their network of connections, and their reputation within the national art field. Their participation in *SPARK Art Fair Vienna* is more about consolidating their local presence: the fair provides an opportunity to strengthen ties with the Viennese art field, demonstrate local relevance, and attract national collectors or institutions. The narrative of local galleries is often built around ‘local significance’, ‘roots’ and connections with the Viennese or Austrian artistic tradition. Moreover, even the placement of Austrian galleries’ booths emphasises their separateness from the international segment of participants, as almost all Austrian galleries were situated in the second area of the venue, separated from the first by a massive wall. As Thornton (2009, 252) notes, an international fair provides ‘a local player with an international platform’, highlighting the dual nature of internationalism: the fair simultaneously serves as a promotional tool and an indicator of status. This is particularly evident in the case of local Viennese galleries, for whom *SPARK Art Fair Vienna* is an opportunity to showcase professional and institutional clout, cement their reputation, and establish connections within the international art field.

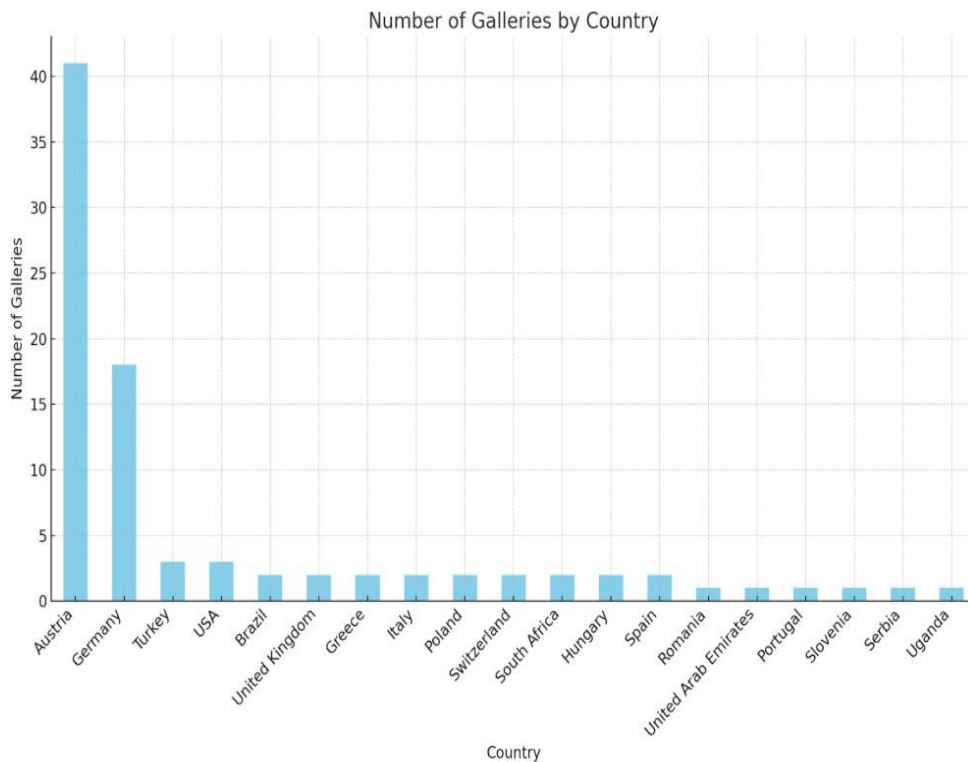


Figure 1 Number of galleries by country participated in SPARK Art Fair Vienna in 2025

Note: The chart was created through OpenAI ChatGPT 5 based on collected data from the field work, specifically the materials and information form events brochures and public sources.

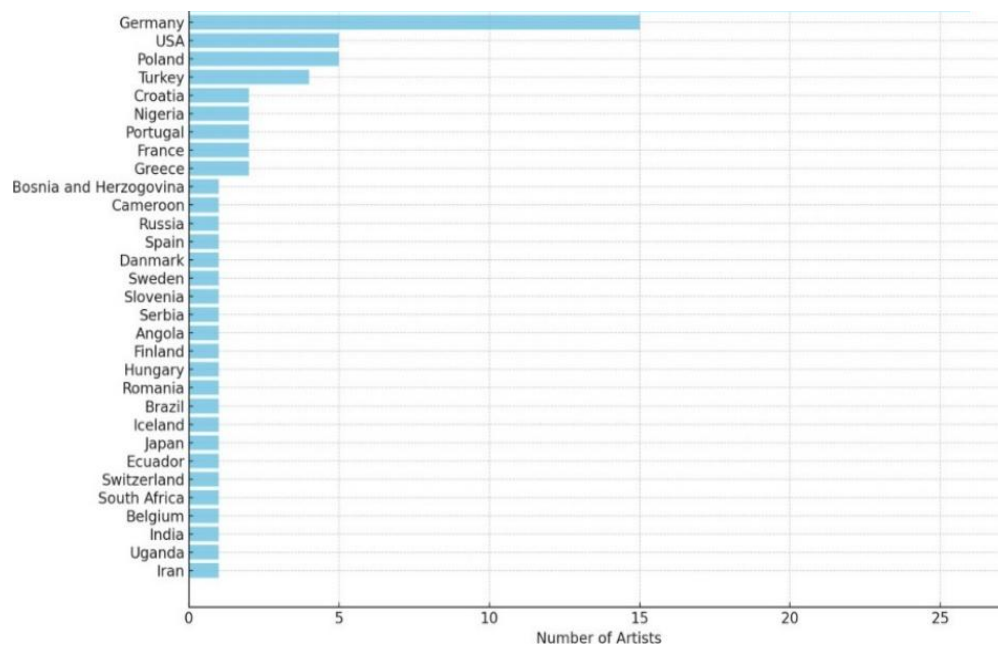


Figure 2 Number of artists by country participated in SPARK Art Fair Vienna in 2025

Note: The chart was created through OpenAI ChatGPT 5 based on collected data from the field work, specifically the materials and information form events brochures and public sources.

International galleries use *SPARK Art Fair Vienna* as a platform to expand geographically by entering the Austrian and Central European markets, enhancing their global reputation, seeking new contacts, and experimenting with new audiences. The ‘*solo presentation*’ format is

advantageous because it allows for showcasing a curatorial project or presenting an artist as a position in international art, which strengthens the ‘international’ status of both the gallery and the artist. International galleries focus on internationalism, global discourse, and legitimacy. For galleries, being present in international networks – by participating in other fairs, exhibitions, and collaborating with galleries from other countries – becomes an important resource for legitimacy: they demonstrate that their artists are in demand globally and that their portfolio is international. We see this in the diversity of countries participating in SPARK 2025 – from Europe to the USA, Brazil, Turkey, and South Africa (see Figure 1). For 2025 – 2026, the fair announced the participation of dozens of galleries and artists from many countries, indicating wide international coverage: according to 2025 data, 90 galleries from five continents (see Figure 1 and 2). This demonstrates SPARK's ambition to go beyond the local Vienna market, attract international players, and represent the diversity of artistic practices, thereby forming ‘globalism’ as symbolic capital (Velthuis 2013). Internationalism simultaneously serves as a branding strategy, logistical challenge, aesthetic discourse, and politico-economic condition. The fair positions itself as the most international Vienna fair, emphasising the participation of galleries representing international artists. This positioning fulfils not only a marketing function: it creates symbolic expectations of diversity, novelty, and cosmopolitan cultural capital, simultaneously enhancing the legitimacy of gallery exhibitions, but also creates pressure: it is necessary to select works so that they signal ‘internationality’ and remain marketable.

I decided to speak with a gallerist from Uganda who was not particularly open to conversation. When I explained that I was conducting research, she nodded and looked at me expectantly. I asked her to tell me more about the works on display. She told me that they explore issues of heritage, tradition, and their reinterpretation in a contemporary context. The gallery owner says that this is the artist's first exhibition in Europe. He wants to show the audience his culture and find out how they will react to his work. The artist received a very positive response. Many people are interested in the works, have asked about the artist, and even asked if he will be attending the fair in person. I asked the gallery representative if she had noticed that the public had certain expectations of non-Western art. She agreed, and afterwards added that the artist deliberately uses traditional motifs because he believes that they need to be told. His work is perceived in this way (through the prism of stereotypes and expectations), but this is to **the advantage of the artist**. He uses this method to attract attention to his work (Interview 22.03.2025).

I then spoke with a gallerist from Turkey, who represented an artist working at the intersection of science and abstract art, exploring the deconstruction of artistic forms. She said, ‘It’s quite interesting, is not it? As a Turkish gallerist who has participated in similar international events

before, I can say I have often noticed that many people in Europe and America expect artists from the Middle East to use bright colours, exotic forms, or politically charged themes. When they encounter abstract art, they sometimes look a bit disappointed, as if thinking, ‘This isn’t quite what we expected.’ This situation is truly frustrating and even hurtful, but unfortunately, it is a reality that artists have to face. She also noted that many gallerists use these prejudices and stereotypes of European and American audiences to promote art from the East and Middle East, raising the artist’s reputation and the price of their work. ‘I don’t like this approach, but I understand how difficult it is to work in this market, and I can’t judge it’ (Interview 22.03.2025). Thus, international gallerists adapt their communication by translating cultural codes into references familiar to the local audience, emphasising institutional recognition, and linking works to global art trends.

Empirical observations show that the Viennese platform does not serve as a space for rewriting or producing global artistic codes, as is the case in dominant art centres (London, New York, Berlin, Paris). On the contrary, international artistic practices are integrated into the existing system of expectations, aesthetic norms and cultural hierarchies. Global discourses and forms are adapted, simplified and translated into a form that is ‘acceptable’ to the local market. Internationality manifests itself through alignment with well-known contexts rather than through radical otherness. Thus, *SPARK Art Fair Vienna* functions not as a centre for generating new international meanings, but as a space for the peripheral translation of global codes into a form compatible with local institutional and market logic.

7. 3.3. Visual, Spatial, and Communicative Differences

SPARK Art Fair Vienna was divided into two large halls, with various booths featuring artworks paintings, installations, and video art. The central area was reserved for the ‘stars’ of the event, as covered in the art publications. The stands were open, designed as white walls joined at an angle without a distinct façade, and clearly labelled with the artist’s name, country, and date of creation. The organisers emphasise that the uniform size and architecture of the stands allow for a ‘deep and personal encounter’ between the public and the artist, and the gallery acts not just as a dealer, but as a ‘developer and presenter’ of the artist’s position (*SPARK Art Fair Vienna*). The format of identical stands removes the visual and institutional hierarchy among galleries, creating a field of equal opportunities. This benefits galleries with fewer resources by offering the same visibility as larger galleries. The solo show format allows each gallery to focus on a single project, deepening the viewer’s experience and enhancing the symbolic value as a curatorial act, not just a commercial one.

Differences started to appear in the style and content of the exhibitions: Western European galleries (London, Berlin, Paris) focused on digital and conceptual art, abstraction, and video art;

Eastern European galleries on politically charged installations; and galleries from the Global South (United Arab Emirates, Uganda, Brazil) displayed works with ethnic motifs, cultural, and visual identity. This inadvertently led to the creation of a mental hierarchy, almost as if participants were viewed through a ‘colonial lens’ – an idea discussed as far back as the 20th century by scholar Said in his famed work, ‘Orientalism’: non–European art is perceived as ‘exotic,’ provoking discussions and inner contradictions among gallerists (Said 1970).

But curatorial policy and the effect of visibility also form structural boundaries. When I returned to the fair on the second day, I caught a thought in my head: ‘I had spent the first day in the international section, so today I would go to the Austrian one’. It later became clear that this quick, unconscious thought in my head was not accidental but rather a reflection of my perception of the spatial logic of the fair. *SPARK Art Fair Vienna 2025* featured sections for new global voices,’ which creates visual and institutional prominence, but also reinforces boundaries – international galleries are grouped in separate zones, Austrian ones in others. Despite the declared principle of equality of stands and unified architecture, the internal organisation of the space reproduces a clear symbolic hierarchy: ritual division supports the status quo and the social understanding of who belongs to the art elite (Anand and Watson 2004).

Most Austrian galleries were concentrated in the second, smaller sector of the fair (marked with the number 2 on the map below). However, the central and most visible stands in the main space were occupied by leading Austrian galleries — primarily from Vienna, but also several from Graz and Salzburg. Galleries such as Krinzing, Christine König Galerie, Galerie nächst St. Stephan (Rosemarie Schwarzwälder), Galerie Kandlhofer, and others, which informants repeatedly referred to in interviews as key players in the Austrian gallery business, were in the central area of the first hall or at the beginning of the visitor's route.

It is crucial that these galleries were not placed in a conventionally ‘local’ sector but rather integrated into the international segment of the fair. Thus, the fair space symbolically conveys the idea that a gallery's status and significance in the Austrian art scene are achieved through its presence in an international context. Here, the international aspect functions not as a geographical characteristic but as a field of legitimisation: to be a ‘major’ local player, a gallery must be visually and symbolically represented as international.

At the same time, the spatial framework was formed by a gallery from Germany, which can be interpreted as an additional marker of external legitimacy. The German art market, which has a more stable position in the international hierarchy, acts here as a kind of structural support through which the Viennese scene symbolically ‘connects’ to a more powerful centre. This emphasises the

dependent nature of Vienna's internationalism: it does not form its own core but builds itself through peripheral attachment to existing centres.

Hence, the spatial organisation of the SPARK Art Fair Vienna visualises and materialises the ongoing crisis of the Austrian art market. On the one hand, there is a demonstrative desire for internationalism, necessary to justify the fair's status as 'international'. However, there is a distinct separation of the local segment. These two principles are not mutually exclusive but are forced to coexist in a tense equilibrium. The fair space becomes an arena where the local and international simultaneously compete and legitimise each other without resolving the structural contradiction between them.

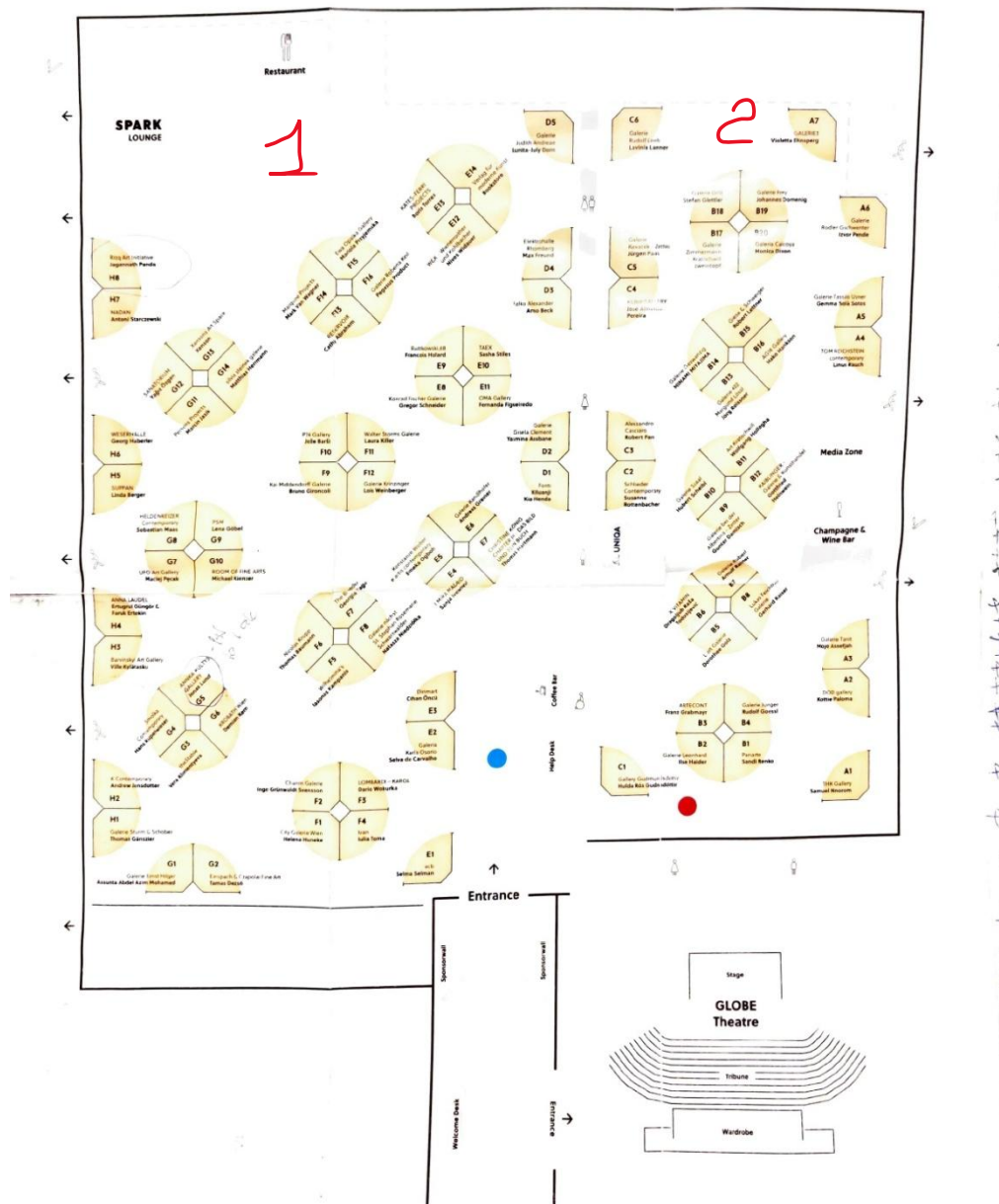


Figure 3 Map of the exhibition space. SPARK Art Fair Vienna Edition 2025. © SPARK Art GmbH

7.3.4. *Legitimation Practices*

Bourdieu (1993) describes the artistic field as an autonomous yet structured space where agents compete for symbolic capital, legitimisation, and the definition of norms. The main currency here is symbolic capital – prestige, recognition, and legitimacy – not economic indicators. The art fair, as a field, is characterised by constant tension between the orientation toward symbolic recognition and commercial success, which determines gallery strategies at the fairs. Velthuis (2005) also emphasizes that ‘pricing is a cultural gesture,’ where the exhibition, fair participation, reputation, and curatorial selection often create the value of a work more than direct sales. In practice, this is visible through several interconnected mechanisms. Legitimation through Curatorship and Selection Curatorial logic occupies a central role in the institutional structure of SPARK Art Fair Vienna. The selection of galleries and the artworks they present is carried out by curators and the fair’s organising committee (Curatorial & Advisory Board)⁷², positing a crucial shift from the quantitative accumulation of participants to a model focused on comparative evaluation and quality of artistic practices presented. This approach underscores the fair’s intention to position itself not only as a market platform, but also as a curatorial space in which selection itself becomes a mechanism of institutional legitimisation.

7.3.5. *International Network as a Resource*

Participation in international exhibitions and collaborations with other galleries allows one to strengthen their status as a global player and generate additional symbolic capital. For galleries, this is an opportunity to strengthen their presence on the Vienna art scene and access the European market (Pettersen 2014). Galleries use artists’ biographies, participation in international exhibitions and awards to foster trust and establish institutional legitimacy. These strategies are closely tied to the real practices of galleries: institutional consolidation (mentioning exhibitions, residencies, and awards), narrative contextualisation (adapting cultural features for the Austrian audience), and reframing risk (presenting international artists as promising objects for collectors). These practices confirm that a successful representation of international artists requires active mediation and the use of various forms of capital, not just artistic quality (Curioni *et al.* 2015).

7.4. International Character of SPARK Art Fair Vienna: Opportunities and Limitations

An analysis of the *SPARK Art Fair Vienna* shows that the fair’s international character is limited and selective. Despite the participation of galleries from different countries and the active use of

⁷² SPARK Art Fair Vienna n.d.

international rhetoric, the fair remains largely focused on the local Austrian art market and its audience. In this context, internationalism serves more as a form of symbolic positioning than because of genuine transnational integration.

For the fair itself, the ‘international’ status plays an important reputational role. This allows *SPARK Art Fair Vienna* to distance itself from purely local events and occupy an intermediate position between the regional art scene and larger international fairs. Internationalism becomes a tool for raising institutional status but is not accompanied by significant market expansion or the development of sustainable international ties.

For Austrian galleries, participation in *SPARK Art Fair Vienna* does not necessarily mean breaking into the international scene. Rather, fairs offer them an opportunity to strengthen their positions within the national art field and present themselves as part of a broader international context. However, such participation rarely leads to long-term international visibility or an expanded circle of international collectors in the art world. Thus, SPARK does not internationalise Austrian galleries, but re-legitimises them locally — by borrowing forms, rhetoric and reputational codes from the global art market. In this sense, internationalism acts not as a mechanism for transforming the market structure, but as a tool for symbolically confirming existing local hierarchies.

International galleries, in turn, face the need to adapt to the expectations of the Austrian public and the local market. In some cases, this leads to the simplification or alteration of artistic content and limits the possibility of presenting works that fall outside familiar, aesthetic, and thematic expectations. Thus, the fair’s internationalism is realised in the form of ‘safe’ and controlled diversity.

Generally, the *SPARK Art Fair Vienna* demonstrates a contradiction between its stated internationalism and its actual local orientation. The fair does create a space for the presence of international participants, but this presence does not transform the structure of the art market or provide equal opportunities for all actors in the field. In this case, internationalism functions as an important symbolic resource but has clearly defined, practical limitations. In this context, *SPARK Art Fair Vienna* can be interpreted as a kind of testing ground — a platform for the cautious expansion of the presence of international galleries and artists, rather than a fully-fledged hub of the global art market.

8. *viennacontemporary*

When I arrived at the *viennacontemporary*, the approach to the fair already set a different tone for perception. Unlike the SPARK Art Fair Vienna, where I entered almost alone and without feeling a threshold, here the space signalled the significance of the event in advance. Large banners hung in front of the entrance to Messe Wien, impossible to miss; there were many people around, some sitting in cafés, others waiting at the entrance, talking, photographing the space. Even at this stage, there was a sense of excitement and density characteristic of events with a pronounced public and institutional status.

At the entrance, I was greeted by several employees checking tickets and navigation, and almost immediately after, I found myself inside the exhibition space. The transition was abrupt: from the external urban environment to the saturated, noisy, and visually and physically dense space of the fair. There were many people inside, the movement was continuous, and the halls themselves felt ‘crowded’ — not in a negative sense, but as a sign of concentration of attention and social presence. It was at that moment that I clearly felt: I was at the fair.

8.1. The History and Transformation of the VIENNAFAIR Art Fair into *viennacontemporary* (2005–2015)

International art fairs in the 21st century play an important role not only as commercial platforms for selling artwork but also as institutions that shape the artistic landscape, define cultural trends, and strengthen international connections between art communities. In this context, the history of the *viennacontemporary* art fair – from the founding of VIENNAFAIR in 2005 to its transformation into *viennacontemporary* in 2015⁷³ – represents a unique case of institutional development, demonstrating how strategic, organizational, and cultural factors influence the viability of art initiatives in a global context. The establishment of VIENNAFAIR was driven by the need to create a platform uniting art galleries, collectors, and cultural institutions from Central and Eastern Europe, as well as to establish Vienna as a significant centre for contemporary art. The fair was organised by Reed Messe Wien GmbH, with artistic direction entrusted to Gabriela Gantenbein and a team predominantly composed of Austrian curators⁷⁴. The first edition of the fair included approximately 90 galleries from 20 countries, a significant portion of which represented the art scenes of Central, Eastern, and Southeastern Europe (CEE/SEE), reflecting Vienna’s geopolitical strategy as a bridge between East and West⁷⁵. However, respondents in

⁷³ *viennacontemporary* N.d.

⁷⁴ OTS-Online 2005.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

several interviews were collected in the Art Archives Study. Before and after 2004⁷⁶ note that the first edition was largely unsuccessful and could hardly be called international despite the presence of galleries from other countries, since the local audience was very localised and local collectors bought Austrian art from Austrian galleries (Art Archives Study, Before and after 2004, 56).

From the beginning, the fair combined commercial activities with a broad cultural program. Public discussions, curatorial projects, and educational initiatives were integrated into the schedule, which made it possible to foster cultural dialogue and strengthen professional connections between galleries, collectors, and institutions, going beyond the simple sale of artworks⁷⁷. This approach made VIENNAFAIR a commercially and culturally significant event capable of attracting international attention. Over the following years, from 2006 to 2010, VIENNAFAIR strengthened its international position. Under the artistic direction of Edek Bartz, the fair's programming developed further: new curatorial sections were introduced, the international network of participants expanded, and the cultural and educational components were enhanced⁷⁸. A key feature of this period was the involvement of international galleries and collectors from Germany, Russia, the UK, the USA, and CEE countries, which helped build a network of professional contacts and enhanced the significance of the fair as a platform for knowledge exchange and commercial opportunities in the region⁷⁹. In 2012, a major institutional shift occurred: the fair was acquired by VF Betriebsgesellschaft mbH under new management, including Christina Steinbrecher-Pfandt as the Artistic Director and Renger van den Heuvel as the Managing Director. These changes made it possible to expand the fair's international profile and strengthen the project's sustainability. By 2014, the fair had reached the peak of its development: more than 120 galleries from dozens of countries participated, and the number of visitors exceeded 25,000⁸⁰. Despite this, there were systemic limitations that required institutional transformation and led to the reorganisation and establishment of the *viennacontemporary* under a new name and format in 2015⁸¹. The main challenges were the fair's irregular scheduling and competition with other international art fairs. In different years, VIENNAFAIR was held on various dates in September and October, making it difficult for international galleries and collectors to plan their visits to Vienna. As Artnet's analysis notes: 'Irregular dates made coordination with other major fairs and

⁷⁶ Note: Project *Art Archives Study. Before and after 2004*. The interviews contain a series of interviews and contextual research on artistic networks, institutions, and collaborations spanning the period around the EU enlargement in 2004, offering qualitative perspectives on how artistic connections and field dynamics developed in Central and Eastern Europe and Austria after the EU enlargement.

⁷⁷ OTS-Online 2005.

⁷⁸ DerStandard 2005.

⁷⁹ OTS-Online 2008, 2010.

⁸⁰ Arterritory.com 2014.

⁸¹ Forbes 2014, Artnet News.

exhibitions difficult, hampering VIENNAFAIR's integration into the international art calendar'⁸². Furthermore, Reed Exhibitions' withdrawal and the transition to an independent management structure required revising the strategy, strengthening organizational sustainability, and rethinking the event format.

At the end of 2014, it was officially announced that the fair would be rebranded and its name changed to the *viennacontemporary*. As the organisers emphasised: 'Under a new name and in a new location, VF Betriebsgesellschaft mbH will organise Vienna's international art fair at the gateway between East and West: *viennacontemporary*'⁸³. In a press release dated 12 March 2015 the mission of the new format was highlighted: 'The first edition of *viennacontemporary* is a major step forward in strengthening Vienna as an international marketplace for contemporary art and as a platform for exchange and networking between art communities of East and West'⁸⁴. Dmitry Aksenov, founder and chairman of the board of RDI Group and *viennacontemporary*, noted: 'Our commitment to *viennacontemporary* is unbroken. I have one great vision: *viennacontemporary*, without a doubt the leading art fair for CEE, aims to mediate between East and West and considers itself a platform for meeting and discussion'⁸⁵. Artistic director Christina Steinbrecher-Pfandt emphasised continuity: 'With *viennacontemporary* we will continue the successful groundwork that our team and us laid during the past three years and consistently pursue the concentration process in all areas which, particularly last year, has been very warmly received by collectors'⁸⁶. The main reasons for the rebranding were the pursuit of stable fixed dates, a change of venue to Marx Halle, a redesigned roster of participants, and a stronger curatorial component to the event. The new format made it possible to integrate the event into the international art calendar, increase predictability for participants and the professional community, and expand its international reach.

The first *viennacontemporary* fair, held from 24 September to 27, 2015, featured 99 galleries from 25 countries. About a third of the galleries were Austrian, a third came from Central and Eastern European countries, and a third from other regions of the world⁸⁷. According to official data from the local press, the fair was attended by 27,725 people, confirming the success of the rebranding and the sustained interest of the audience⁸⁸. Commercial activity was also high: galleries reported stable sales, including preliminary contracts, which affirmed the fair's ability to serve as an effective commercial platform—strong art scene, strong art fair⁸⁹. An analysis of the geographical

⁸² Perlson 2015, Artnet News.

⁸³ *viennacontemporary* 2014, Press release.

⁸⁴ *viennacontemporary* 2015, Press release.

⁸⁵ Interview quoted in *viennacontemporary*, Press release 2015.

⁸⁶ Interview quoted in *viennacontemporary*, Press release 2015.

⁸⁷ *viennacontemporary* 2015, Press release.

⁸⁸ Die Presse 2015.

⁸⁹ Artsy 2018.

makeup of participants showed that *viennacontemporary* maintained its focus on Central and Eastern Europe while simultaneously opening its space to international participants, underscoring its strategic goal of serving as a mediating platform between East and West. Participant feedback confirmed that the professional audience perceived the rebranding not as a mere marketing ploy but as a substantial improvement in the conditions of the fair. For instance, the co-founder of the Geukens & De Vil gallery noted: ‘But we sold eight or nine pieces at the opening and a few in advance... If it goes well, we show them again’⁹⁰. After the rebranding, the fair continued to develop steadily, strengthening Vienna’s international reputation as a contemporary art centre. In subsequent years, the number of galleries remained at approximately 97–103, with curatorial programs expanding and international audiences maintaining a high level of interest⁹¹. The history of VIENNAFAIR and its transformation into *viennacontemporary* illustrates the complex factors that influence the success of art fairs: institutional organisation, positioning strategy, curatorial policy, time frame, and commercial dynamics. The rebranding showed that a successful rethinking of the format makes it possible to retain the audience, expand international influence, and create a sustainable platform for cultural and commercial dialogue among countries, regions and art communities.

The story of VIENNAFAIR's transformation into *viennacontemporary* also shows that the attempt at institutional stabilisation and rebranding was aimed not so much at turning Vienna into an autonomous centre of the global art market as at consolidating its role as an intermediary platform between different regional scenes. Despite the growth in the number of participants and the strengthening of international rhetoric, from the outset the fair was built on the logic of a ‘bridge’ rather than a ‘hub,’ which structurally limited its potential as a global centre.

8.2. Institutional Architecture

As an art fair, *viennacontemporary* develops in a space where commerce, culture, and the institutional structures of the international art market intersect. Its architecture as an event is not just a commercial exposition of works, but also an international identity at the crossroads of East and West – a platform for the Central and Eastern European (CEE) scenes, as well as a hybrid of an art fair and a public program that includes curated sections, discussions and tours. This makes it one of the rare European fairs that strives to integrate the art market and the art field as an institutional space (Bourdieu 1993; Becker 1982). One of the key elements through which the *viennacontemporary* constructs its institutional identity is the combination of an international fair for the European market – including smaller regional markets – and a platform for CEE galleries

⁹⁰ Interview quoted in Sharp, Artsy 2015.

⁹¹ *viennacontemporary* 2025, Press release.

and young artists. Historically, the fair's predecessor, VIENNAFAIR, was established as a specialised venue focused on Central, Eastern, and Southeastern Europe, providing an opportunity to spotlight new names from these regions and strengthening Vienna's position as a contemporary art centre. This regional emphasis is maintained by *viennacontemporary*, where, alongside international and Austrian galleries, those from CEE countries participate, ensuring visibility for regional scenes that would otherwise have limited access to Western European art markets⁹².

In addition to its commercial function, the *viennacontemporary* develops a public program that includes curated sections, talks, guided tours, and other educational initiatives. Programs such as STATEMENT, CONTEXT, and ZONE1, presented in recent editions, operate as thematic and curated segments intended to foster dialogue about artistic practices and historical and contemporary contexts and engage visitors in a critical perception of art. For example, the CONTEXT section is positioned as a platform for dialogue between twentieth-century artistic positions and contemporary practices, expanding the traditional concept of the fair beyond the purely commercial exhibition of artists' works⁹³. An important part of the fair's structure is the guided tours, which are regularly offered in English and German and cover thematic routes⁹⁴. This clearly emphasizes education and broad audience engagement in artistic discourse, rather than focusing solely on the commercial aspect of transactions⁹⁵. In addition, *viennacontemporary* traditionally features a series of discussions and talks that serve as expert and educational components of the art fair, where topics such as contemporary art, the art market, collecting, and the role of curators are addressed. In 2025, the fair collaborated with the Vienna Business Agency to host the conversation '*Join the Conversation: New hopes for a changing world*', moderated by a professional in curatorial practices⁹⁶. This session discussed the role of the curator in the contemporary global context – a direct indication of how the fair engages with high-level professional discourse and institutional experts in the fields of curation and the art market⁹⁷.

viennacontemporary's institutional connections extend beyond the fair, involving galleries, museums, and collections in Vienna and Austria. The official historical overview highlights that even VIENNAFAIR had ties with art institutions, inviting museum directors and curators to participate in discussions and special programs, thus integrating the fair into a network of artistic

⁹² Kats 2016, Artsy.

⁹³ *viennacontemporary* n.d.

⁹⁴ *Note*: for example, 'Under 30', 'The Future is Female', 'Kids' Tour', Kids' Tour, and curator-led tours of the exhibition's sections)

⁹⁵ *viennacontemporary* n.d.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

institutions in the city and the region to expand the audience and professional connections⁹⁸. Although specific independent publications about *viennacontemporary*'s museum partnerships are lacking, the ongoing tradition of the Talks program and guided tours is indicative of the strong institutional ties the fair maintains with Vienna's art field, which includes the city's major museums and galleries. The mechanisms legitimising *viennacontemporary* as an art market institution are multifaceted and complex. These include press releases and media coverage⁹⁹. The range of these materials – from participant reviews to interviews with artistic directors – serves as an element of public legitimation and symbolic capital for the fair. Expert councils and curatorial committees comprising gallerists and curators are involved in shaping exhibitions and programs, further strengthening the project's institutional authority. Finally, the phenomenon of the art fair in academic literature is viewed not only as a commercial event but also as a cultural and social phenomenon, integrating various groups of art world actors: artists, gallerists, curators, collectors, critics, and viewers. Studies emphasise that art fairs function as network platforms, facilitate knowledge exchange, help build reputation and professional connections among participants in the art sphere, and provide significant spaces for cultural interaction and public discourse that go beyond buying and selling works (Zagrebelnaia 2025, 115). This multifunctional nature of *viennacontemporary* creates tension between its commercial and institutional functions. On the one hand, as an art fair, it is oriented toward sales, networking between galleries and collectors, and economic activity. Conversely, the expanded Talks program, curated sections, and educational tours demonstrate a commitment to cultural and public functions, transforming the fair into not just an art market but also a public platform for cultural exchange, critical reflection, and social engagement. This tension is characteristic of contemporary art fairs in general: as research on the social roles of art fairs shows, the public's socio-cultural expectations often go beyond purely commercial functions, and art events are perceived as spaces for education and cultural communication alongside the sale of works (Zagrebelnaia 2025, 124).

Thus, the institutional architecture of *viennacontemporary* demonstrates the tension between the commercial logic of the fair and its cultural and educational mission. This hybridity enhances the symbolic capital of the event, but at the same time reduces its market rigidity, establishing the fair's status as an institutionally significant but economically secondary space in the global art system.

⁹⁸ *viennacontemporary* n.d.

⁹⁹ *Note:* by both local and international art publications, participation in which confirms the fair's status (for example, The New York Times, Forbes, Artsy, etc.)

8.3. Evolution of Format and Institutional Framework

Since 2015, *viennacontemporary* has positioned itself as an international art fair in Austria, focusing on contemporary art from Central and Eastern Europe and other parts of the world. Its early years (until 2020) took place in the industrial space of Marx Halle, highlighting the project's experimental and open character¹⁰⁰. The pandemic year of 2020 brought significant changes: the fair was adapted to the conditions of limited public events, maintaining international exhibitions but altering the format of interaction. According to 2020 press reports, the general concept aimed to showcase the international scene under the new reality, although the number of participants was lower than pre-pandemic times¹⁰¹. In 2021, some *viennacontemporary* events were held at Neue Alte Post¹⁰². From 2022 to 2023, the fair shifted to Kursalon (Stadtpark), a venue more closely connected to the central urban dynamic and Vienna's cultural institutions. This move was associated with strengthening the fair's institutional profile and consolidating its representative position as a significant cultural event in the autumn art season.

The culmination was the organizers' decision to move *viennacontemporary* to Messe Wien, Hall D for 2024–2025. This allowed for the expansion of the exhibition's scale, improved logistics, and increased the event's international visibility. The changes in venue reflect not only organizational needs but also a symbolic strategy: the transition from industrial and experimental spaces to a professional exhibition infrastructure demonstrates a desire to visually and spatially confirm the status of an international fair, even if Vienna's structural position in the global art market remains unchanged.

8.4. *viennacontemporary* edition 2025

In 2025, *viennacontemporary* returns to a large-scale format and is held from September 11 to 14 at the professional exhibition venue Messe Wien (Hall D). According to official data and press materials, the fair features between 97 and 102 exhibitors, representing around 97 galleries from approximately 25 countries, highlighting the organisers' commitment to emphasising the event's international nature. In its public rhetoric, the *viennacontemporary* positions itself as 'Austria's leading international fair of contemporary art' with a special focus on the artistic scenes of Central and Eastern Europe¹⁰³. Thus, the scale, choice of venue, and declared geography of participants

¹⁰⁰ *viennacontemporary*. n.d.

¹⁰¹ *viennacontemporary* 2020, Press release.

¹⁰² FindART.cc. 2021.

¹⁰³ *viennacontemporary*, n.d.

shape the fair's image as a major international professional event rooted in a regional but transnationally oriented logic.

Between 2020 and 2025, *viennacontemporary* demonstrated significant growth and internationalisation, forming a platform capable of uniting local and international artistic practices in a globalised art world. Changes in format and spatial organisation, expansion of exhibitor lists, introduction of curated sections, and the strategic use of public programming all indicate the transformation of the fair into a sustainable institutional agent that fosters symbolic capital, strengthens professional networks, and encourages inter-regional dialogue. These processes make *viennacontemporary* an example of the articulation of commercial and cultural logics characteristic of semi-peripheral European art markets.

8.4.1. Geography of Participation and Gallery Dynamics

One of the first observations that caught my eye (and ear) was the almost complete absence of the German language. English dominated the space, often mixed with Eastern European and Slavic languages—Russian, Polish, and Slovakian. German was heard mainly in border areas: at the entrance, in service areas, or during short functional exchanges. Thus, the international character of the fair was evident not only in the declared geography of the participants but also as an acoustic reality that created a sense of inclusion in a transnational field.

This linguistic distribution unexpectedly emphasises Vienna's paradoxical position in the global art world. Physically located in the Austrian capital, I hardly felt the local cultural context—it seemed to recede, giving way to the universal language of the art market and Eastern European mobility. In this sense, *viennacontemporary* produced a feeling of internationality as an event, as an intense social experience, but not as a stable centre, rather as a temporary point of intersection between various peripheries and semi-peripheries of the art world.

An analysis of the exhibitor lists of the fair shows a steady increase in the number of participants and geographic expansion of galleries. Data from the Exhibitor List 2025 press release indicate that *viennacontemporary* 2025 brought together 103 participants from 25 countries, including 37 Austrian galleries and 38 galleries from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), highlighting the fair's strategic interest in both local and regional networks (see Figure 4). The official exhibitor list archives on the fair's website contain detailed lists of past participants (2020–2024), allowing one to observe a trend of growing numbers of international galleries and a consistent presence of

Austrian participants¹⁰⁴. For example, the exhibitor list for 2022 included more than 40 galleries from Austria, Germany, Poland, the Czech Republic, Italy, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, and Ukraine, indicating broad regional and international representation¹⁰⁵. From 2020 to 2025, the data revealed two important trends: first, a relative strengthening of the local presence of Austrian galleries, reflecting increased institutional trust in the domestic art scene; and second, stable and even growing participation of international galleries from Western Europe and other regions, reinforcing the fair's international character and positioning it as a platform for interregional dialogue in art.

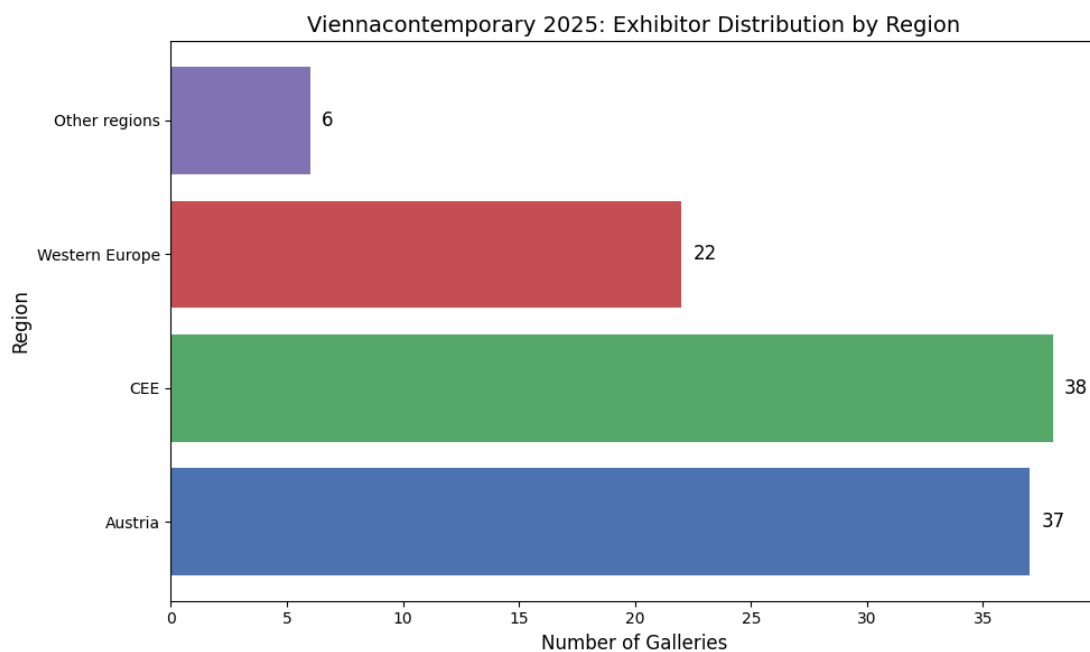


Figure 4 *viennacontemporary 2025: Exhibitor distribution by region*

Note: The chart was created through OpenAI ChatGPT 5 based on collected data from the field work, specifically the materials and information from events brochures and public sources.

The geography of participants confirms that *viennacontemporary* functions as a point of primary legitimisation and entry into the international arena, especially for galleries and artists from Central and Eastern Europe. However, successful actors who have consolidated their position tend to leave this platform, which reinforces the fair's status as a 'transition zone' rather than a sustainable international centre.

8.4.2. *Typology of Participants and Positioning Strategies*

Participation strategies at the *viennacontemporary* demonstrate diverse approaches from both local and international galleries. Austrian galleries have traditionally emphasised their commitment to

¹⁰⁴ *viennacontemporary*, n.d.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

institutional legitimisation, linking participation to professional achievements, museum partnerships, and educational initiatives. International participants use *viennacontemporary* to expand their geographic reach, showcase experimental projects, and build professional networks in Central and Eastern Europe. Differences in positioning practices are also evident in how galleries design their booths and communicate with professional and general audiences. Commercial booths typically follow a unified exhibition logic aimed at the broad reception of artworks. Curated sections such as STATEMENT, CONTEXT, and ZONE1, included in the 2025 exhibition structure, provide a platform for more conceptual and experimental projects, increasing the symbolic value of participation and strengthening the perception of the fair as an institution of discursive legitimisation. The (*viennacontemporary*) SECTION CONTEXT offers immersion into historical and theoretical frameworks, connecting contemporary art with the history of artistic practices and regional traditions, thereby enhancing the fair's educational component¹⁰⁶.

8.4.3. *Internationality as a Strategy for Balancing Local and Global*

It is important to emphasise that local rootedness does not contradict an international strategy. In contrast, Velthuis (2013) notes that trust, reputation, and connections within the local environment are necessary prerequisites for participating in the so-called international art world. For Viennese galleries, the local network provided a reliable foundation upon which the image of internationalism was constructed. The 'international' label becomes a way to balance between the local and the global: galleries demonstrate their belonging to the international community while simultaneously affirming their competence and significance in the national context. This appeared in the organisation of fair zones and programs (ZONE1, STATEMENT) for young and regional artists, the structure of exhibitors, and curatorial initiatives¹⁰⁷. Even events that position themselves as international often use local participants to create an authentic image of integration into the regional art context (for example, Parallel Vienna and Fair for Art Vienna). Thus, the 'international' label fulfils three interconnected functions: (1) legitimising local participants and institutions on the global stage; (2) generating symbolic capital that strengthens visibility and prestige; and (3) balancing local networks and global rhetorical practices, allowing fairs and galleries to position themselves simultaneously within both national and international spheres.

8.4.4. *Spatial organisation*

At first glance, the division of the exhibition space at the *viennacontemporary* into zones appeared to be similar to the logic of *SPARK Art Fair Vienna*. Despite differences in scale and status, the nonverbal codes of the organisation retain a scheme in which local galleries form separate,

¹⁰⁶ *viennacontemporary*, n.d.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

concentrated clusters. At the *viennacontemporary*, this was expressed through the colour coding of the zones: the red, burgundy, blue, and light blue zones mainly included Austrian galleries, while the grey zone formed a mix of international participants. This spatial division creates a visually and physically perceptible boundary between the ‘local’ and ‘international’ scenes, while emphasising the importance of Austrian players, who occupy the central and most prominent positions.

The central placement of the ‘stars’ of the Austrian scene - Galerie Krinzinger, Lombardi Kargl Galerie, Galerie Martin Janda, Galerie nächst St. Stephan (Rosemarie Schwarzwälder) - creates the effect that the fair opens with a local cultural identity. Upon entering, visitors immediately encounter these galleries, which are located in the central area and are surrounded by international participants. This arrangement reinforces the symbolic status of Austrian galleries: they are visible, significant, and simultaneously positioned as ‘key players’ in an international context. Even within the framework of an international exhibition, Austrian galleries remain the centre of attention, forming a link for the perception of the fair as an institution.

Interestingly, galleries that were not affiliated with either Austria or Eastern Europe - such as participants from Ireland or Spain - were placed in the rearmost areas of the exhibition. These positions were accompanied by extremely low attendance and relatively weak commercial activity. The nonverbal spatial marginalization of such participants underscores the boundaries of institutional and symbolic legitimacy: participation in the fair does not guarantee equal visual or social weight. At the same time, it reveals an important structural effect: *viennacontemporary* positions itself as a platform for Austrian and Central and Eastern European galleries, where international participants from ‘distant’ countries play a rather peripheral role.

Thus, an analysis of the space shows that the physical organization of the fair reproduces and symbolizes the tension between the local and the global. The central, brightly lit areas with Austrian ‘stars’ surrounded by international galleries form the core of institutional and symbolic capital, while international participants who do not fit into the strategic regional focus find themselves in peripheral sectors. Space here functions as a visual and physical ‘code’ reflecting status and cultural hierarchies, where centrality and visibility correlate with legitimacy and prestige, and peripherality with relative marginality and limited commercial effectiveness.

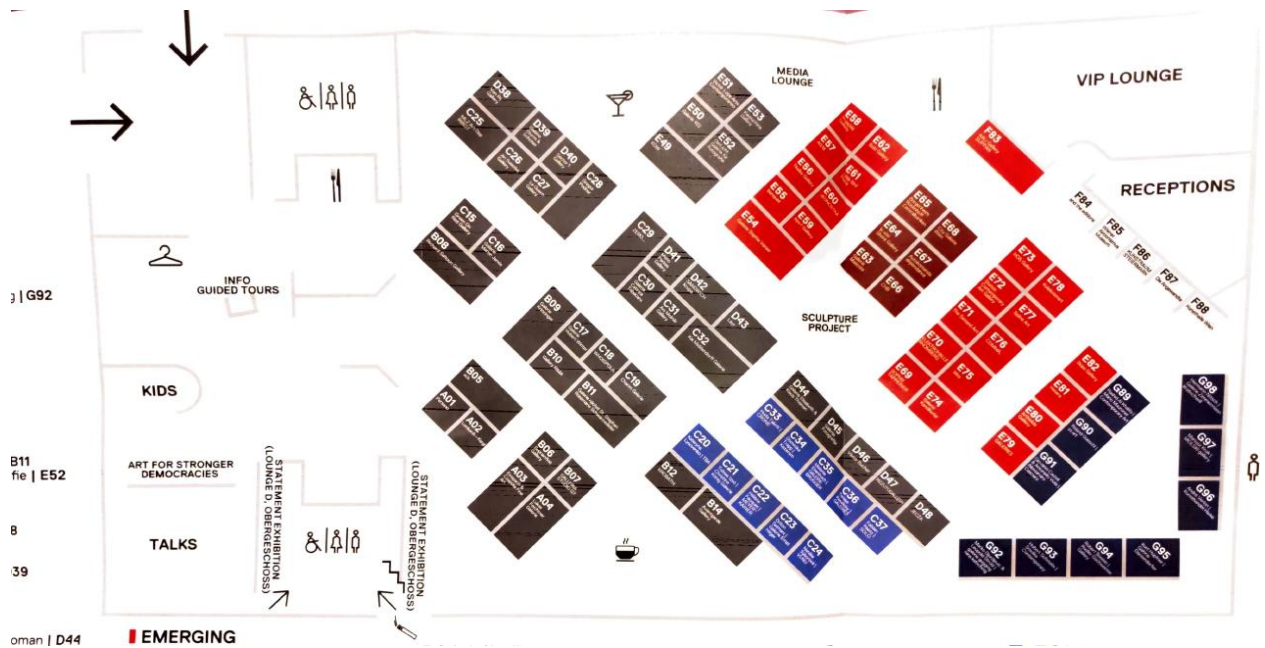


Figure 5 Map of the exhibition space. *viennacontemporary* Edition 2025. © Claudia Cavallar & Lukas Lederer

8.5. Constructing Internationalism: Symbolic Capital, Institutional Mediation, and Limitations

viennacontemporary operates not only as a commercial platform but also as an infrastructural intermediary connecting galleries, curators, researchers, collectors, and the public audience. The STATEMENT, ZONE1, and CONTEXT sections¹⁰⁸ demonstrate that the fair creates a space where commercial and cultural logics intersect to form new perspectives for artistic exchange. The emphasis on curatorial sections, themes, and thematic programs makes the *viennacontemporary* a place for shaping discourse, not just conducting trade. Participation in the fair is seen as a strategic investment in reputation, the ability to establish international connections, and strengthen professional standing rather than a direct tool for commercial profit. Such strategies are particularly noticeable among international participants, who use *viennacontemporary* to enhance their networking opportunities and position themselves on the European stage. Being one of the first art fairs to appear in Vienna, it chose a clear and strategically promising focus—art from Central and Eastern European countries—from the outset. As noted in a 2019 article in the international publication *The Art Newspaper*, *viennacontemporary* has become an important art event for countries that were previously behind the Iron Curtain and did not have art fairs of comparable international calibre¹⁰⁹. By 2019, almost a third of the participating galleries represented Eastern Europe, only slightly less than the number of galleries from Austria. This focus of the fair directly correlates with Austria's and Vienna's cultural policies, which, as shown in

¹⁰⁸ Viennacontemporary, n.d.

¹⁰⁹ Kobel 2019, *The Art Newspaper*.

chapters five and six, consistently position themselves as a ‘bridge’ between Western and Eastern Europe. However, despite the conceptual appeal of such a strategy, research has revealed several structural issues limiting the international potential of *viennacontemporary*. First, participants in the art field mostly perceive the fair as a springboard for artists and galleries from Eastern Europe. As Stefan Kobel notes in *The Art Newspaper*, as soon as artists and galleries gain greater recognition and market success, they usually cease their participation in the *viennacontemporary*, moving on to larger international fairs¹¹⁰. They return to the Austrian context only in the form of large-scale institutional or commercial projects, but not as part of the fair. Second, *viennacontemporary* functions as a kind of ‘starting point’ for the international art scene, constantly searching for new names. On the one hand, this allows the fair to serve as an incubator for Eastern European artistic practices; on the other, it cements its status as an entry-level platform for emerging artists. Unlike, for example, the *SPARK Art Fair Vienna*, *viennacontemporary* is characterised by the insufficient presence of Western European and global galleries, which decreases its appeal for major Austrian collectors. As emphasised in specialist publications, a significant share of Austrian collectors makes their purchases at fairs in Basel or London, while the *viennacontemporary* audience consists mainly of collectors oriented toward Eastern European art and the relatively lower-priced segment. An additional factor is the lack of alternative major regional platforms for Eastern European art: an attempt to create a comparable fair in the region (the CosMoscow fair) lost its European partners and participants because of the war that broke out in 2022 (Taylor 2023, 115). As a result, the *viennacontemporary* remains virtually the only significant platform of its kind outside Austria. Thus, the focus on Central and Eastern Europe simultaneously serves as both a competitive advantage and a structural limitation for *viennacontemporary*: on the one hand, it gives the fair a clear identity and niche significance, but on the other, it hinders its transformation into a full-fledged player in the global art market.

Unlike its competitor *SPARK Art Fair Vienna*, the 2025 edition of the *viennacontemporary* did not achieve significant commercial success. At the fair’s opening, Marx Huber warned participants about the challenging economic situation in Austria, characterised by a downturn in business, reflecting the overall instability analysed in more detail in the fifth chapter of this study. While *SPARK Art Fair Vienna* showed strong sales during the preview Thursday, *viennacontemporary* lagged significantly behind: according to *The Art Newspaper*, by the end of the second day, some galleries had not sold a single work, and sales that did take place were mostly at low prices. Interestingly, most sales went to international participants, while local Austrian dealers and

¹¹⁰ Kobel 2019, *The Art Newspaper*.

institutions faced notable disappointment¹¹¹. For example, the booth dedicated to the prominent Austrian artist Hermann Nitsch did not achieve a single sale by the end of the second day. Despite Huber's statements that around 85% of tourists come to the city for cultural events, the 2025 edition failed to attract a significant audience. Specifically, *viennacontemporary*'s attendance amounted to about 15,000 people, which is significantly lower than *SPARK Art Fair Vienna* (22,000 visitors) and previous editions of *viennacontemporary*, which attracted about 25,000 people over four days¹¹².

An analysis of *viennacontemporary* shows that Vienna functions not as a centre for the production of global art codes, but as an institutional mediator and platform for primary legitimation. Despite its developed infrastructure, stable state support, and dense network of institutions, internationalism here is compensatory in nature. It is used to confirm the significance of local actors, rather than to form an autonomous global market. In this sense, *viennacontemporary* acts as a tasting ground or peripheral extension of existing international contours, but not as a point of redefinition. This explains why Vienna, with its solid art infrastructure, remains a symbolically significant but economically secondary hub of the global art world.

¹¹¹ Adam 2025, The Art Newspaper.

¹¹² Ibid.

Conclusion

Despite Vienna's recognition as one of Europe's leading cultural capitals, its visual art market cannot compete with global centres such as London, Paris and New York. We can conclude that Austria occupies rather an intermediate position on the world art scene, acting as a semi-peripheral centre that capitalises on its rich cultural infrastructure – museums, galleries, art fairs, and public projects – to enhance its visibility and attract international attention.

The research reveals a striking paradox at the heart of the Austrian art market: a simultaneous striving for international recognition and a structural pull towards localism. While state rhetoric and cultural policy promote Vienna as a global cultural hub, fundamental economic and institutional mechanisms, such as high VAT and a funding system oriented toward local practices, keep the market inward-looking. A historical overview shows that after World War II, Austria leveraged its status as a neutral country to establish cultural connections in Eastern and Western Europe. In the 1970s and the 1980s, a network of state-run contemporary art galleries developed, while private collections were virtually non-existent. After 1995, with Austria's accession to the European Union, the market gradually began to integrate into the global system, although it remained a niche player. Since the early 2000s, state cultural policy has increased support for contemporary art infrastructure: the Museums Quartier Wien project, for instance, became the largest cultural cluster in Central Europe, and Vienna Art Week brings together over 70 partner venues and delivers a significant local presence on the international art scene. Simultaneously, the market structure is structured mostly around Vienna, with little coverage of other regions, and the concentration of private galleries in the capital underlines the market's local character.

One cannot avoid the conversation on the ongoing art market crisis, exacerbated by the pandemic. It is multidimensional and affects both the economic and social structures of the market, including factors such as excessive commercialisation of art, broken mechanisms of recognition and legitimacy, overproduction of art objects, and digital transformation through NFTs, digital art, and generative AI. Social ties and established subcultural groups have proven decisive for the survival of market participants, while newcomers are especially vulnerable. The Austrian art market within these circumstances displays a pronounced duality: the public sector, comprising museums and cultural clusters, receives the main funding and shows resilience against crises, whereas the private sector, mainly family run galleries, faces economic challenges. This vulnerability was particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, when exhibition closures and fair cancellations significantly reduced gallery revenues, and state support was largely directed toward public institutions rather than private galleries.

Turning to the matter of state financial aid system, it is necessary to highlight that Austrian art state support operates at three levels: European, national, and local. The main tools are subsidies, tax incentives, and specialized funds (SVS, KS VF, NPO-Fonds, Galerieförderung), as well as the activities of professional associations such as the Verband Österreichischer Galerien Moderner Kunst. Nevertheless, private sector representatives often view these support measures as insufficient for international development. The high VAT (13%) places Austrian galleries at a competitive disadvantage internationally, limiting their opportunities for integration into global chains. Although the pandemic showed that temporary measures, such as reducing the VAT on art from 13% to 5%, help revive the market and clearly demonstrate the possibility of structural changes, the subsequent return to the previous rate restored existing barriers, evidencing systemic resistance to reforms that could truly internationalise the Austrian art market. Overall, the Austrian market represents how the crisis of the art world articulates in peripheral centres: ambitions clash with economic and institutional barriers, and government grants, professional associations, and crisis measures provide only partial sector stability.

We can conclude that, the Austrian art market is a microcosm of the crisis facing contemporary art market. On the one hand, state and institutional mechanisms ensure local sector stability; on the other, the market remains inward-looking and structurally limited. This duality is reflected in the contradiction between big cultural ambitions and economic reality: galleries are forced to balance their desire for international visibility with the need to survive amid local constraints.

From one side, art fairs became a tool to compensate for this locality: they create a symbolic international context where Austrian galleries can demonstrate their belonging to the global art field, strengthen their reputation, and accumulate symbolic capital. International art fairs are viewed not only as commercial platforms for trading artworks but also as tools for consolidating the symbolic capital of participants, earning them professional recognition, and strengthening the city's status on the global art map. At the same time, they do not rewrite the rules of the global art system, but rather serve as a 'testing ground' or 'receptive form' for the international market, forming a peripheral extension: Vienna accepts international codes, adapts them and 'represents' the global field at the local level.

For galleries, participation serves multiple functions: expanding the client base, enhancing their professional reputation, and integrating local practices into global processes. Meanwhile, the local standing of galleries, their recognition within the professional field, and their strong local networks are essential prerequisites for participation in international networks. However, the research shows that actual practice in Vienna remains largely local and limited. Gallery sales and activities focus

on a limited circle of local collectors, and professional and institutional networks are primarily national.

Field research identified key factors restricting the full internationalisation of Viennese fairs, including a weak base of international art buyers, underdeveloped infrastructure and organizational instability, limited professional exchange, a lack of international experts and curators, and minimal involvement by major museums and institutions. These constraints create a gap between declared international ambitions and actual local realities of climate action. The concept of internationality serves more as a symbolic than an objective function, helping to enhance the status of participants and institutions in the eyes of the professional community. Simultaneously, local market particularities and structural constraints limit their potential for true global integration. The analysis of two case studies – *SPARK Art Fair Vienna* and *viennacontemporary* – reveals a structural problem regarding how internationality is articulated and realised in the context of Viennese art fairs. Despite the persistent use of the term ‘international art fair’ in institutional self-presentation, media discourse, and marketing strategies, empirical data indicate that, in these cases, internationality is mostly symbolic and declarative. Here, internationality functions not so much as the result of real transnational integration but as a reputational resource that strengthens the fair’s symbolic capital. The very designation of the fair as international performs a performative function: it embeds the event into the global art discourse, raises its status in the eyes of local actors, and creates the illusion of inclusion in the international art world. However, at the level of practice – participant structure, public profile, sales logic, and mediation mechanisms – the fairs remain largely focused on the local market. Moreover, the document reveals intense institutional competition, or ‘factional struggle’, among Vienna’s leading fairs, resulting in public scandals, management changes, and even event cancellations, highlighting the art ecosystem’s fragility.

A key finding of this thesis is the tension between the proclaimed internationalism and the local logic of operation. This tension can be described as a conflict between the symbolic level of globalisation and the practical level of locality. International galleries participating in Vienna art fairs must adapt to the expectations of the Austrian public, which often entails a certain aesthetic ‘legibility’, cultural recognisability, and conformity to local notions of contemporary art. In this context, international art is drawn into an asymmetrical interaction, where its ‘internationality’ is acceptable only as long as it does not disrupt local tastes and market boundaries. At the same time, the participation of local Austrian galleries in fairs with international branding does not result in a sustainable expansion of their presence on the international art scene. The fair’s international status does not automatically translate into international visibility or recognition for local participants.

Art fairs function more as a local commercial and reputational platform than as a mechanism for the transnational circulation of art and actors.

Thus, locality and internationalism in Vienna are not opposed to each other, but exist in a complex interaction: internationalism symbolically legitimises Austrian practices in the professional field, compensating for structural limitations, but does not overcome them. Vienna's trade fairs show that internationalism functions as a symbolic and spatial-institutional tool that allows local actors to integrate into global discourse without changing the local market structure. The main conclusion of the study is that the international status of fairs performs a performative function: it strengthens the reputation of participants and institutions, creates the appearance of global exchange, and conceals local and structural limitations, confirming the hypothesis that the internationality of Austrian fairs is more representative than productive.

As a result, one can speak of the emergence of a phenomenon of apparent internationalisation – a situation in which international status exists mainly at the level of rhetoric and symbolic representation, without being supported by the necessary institutional infrastructure, stable international networks, and long-term strategies of internationalization. Such internationalism does not eliminate but rather reproduces local hierarchies in the art market, disguising them under the universalist discourse of globality.

Therefore, Vienna art fairs demonstrate that internationality in the contemporary art market can function as an independent value and brand, not necessarily implying real transformation of market and cultural practices. This conclusion allows for a critical re-evaluation of the role of art fairs as institutions of art globalisation and questions their ability to ensure genuine transnational exchange amid the persistent dominance of local markets. Despite the findings obtained, this study also points to a broad field for future research. Overall, the academic literature dedicated to the Austrian art market remains comparatively limited, making this topic particularly promising for subsequent analyses. First, future research could go beyond the Viennese context and address other Austrian cities, such as Graz and Innsbruck, which also have their own art infrastructure and exhibition venues.

Another aspect for the further analysis could be the understanding of how international art fairs and exhibition formats function in these local contexts, interact with local audiences, and deploy the rhetoric and branding of 'internationality' in the context of peripheral or semi-peripheral art scenes. Second, considering that this study primarily focuses on the positions of gallerists and the institutional logic of art fairs, its results reflect only one group of actors in the primary art market (gallerists). In the future, it would be advisable to expand the analytical framework by including

other participants in the art ecosystem –collectors, artists, museum curators, and representatives of state cultural and collecting policy. Such a multifaceted approach would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms by which the art market operates in Vienna and Austria as a whole, as well as the processes of value, recognition, and institutional legitimisation. Finally, a promising direction for further research is to consider internationalisation as a political and strategic instrument in the field of art. Analysing the ways in which the discourse of internationalism is used in cultural policy, city branding, and institutional strategies, and how the art market responds to crisis situations – economic, geopolitical, or symbolic – can significantly deepen our understanding of the role of art in contemporary processes of globalisation and cultural governance.

To conclude, the research on art-fairs in Vienna demonstrates how international branding and local institutions are connected forming a unique position on global art scene. Despite the symbolic status of ‘international’ art fairs, their real integration to the global art world is limited by structural and economic barriers what highlights the necessity of studies on local factors in globalised cultural contexts. This approach contributes to anthropological debates on globalisation and locality, as well as on art world showing how cultural and institutional mechanisms intertwine creating stable but restricted forms of international recognition. Observed duality of international ambitious and local practices shows that internationality in art-world can be seen as rather symbolic then productive phenomenon.

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