

From the State of the Art Fair to the State for the Art Fair

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Abstract

This thesis examines contemporary art fairs as an object of organisational and cultural policy analysis. While art fairs have attracted growing scholarly attention across disciplines, the organisational dimension and the cultural policy dimension have remained unexplored. Through a collection of four articles, the thesis investigates these dimensions across multiple levels of analysis, from the single organisation to the urban policy environment to the European policy landscape.

The first article (Chapter 2) adopts the institutional logics perspective (Thornton and Ocasio, 1999; Battilana et al., 2017) to provide the first population-level organisational mapping of 206 contemporary art fair organisers internationally, identifying six ideal-typical configurations and showing that hybrid arrangements combining market, non-profit and public sector elements have proliferated since the 2000s alongside competitive intensification, curatorial differentiation and culture-led urban strategies. A longitudinal case study of Artissima in Turin traces the fair's hybridisation across four configurations over three decades and analyses how successive curator-directors managed conflicting demands (Oliver, 1991; Pache and Santos, 2010) from galleries and public stakeholders, showing that strategic responses shifted from acquiescence to defiance as public funding declined.

The second article (Chapter 3) examines how the City of Turin integrated contemporary art into its urban tourism strategies between 2000 and 2024, distinguishing between strategic framing, policy implementation and results. It shows that across three municipal strategic plans, Turin developed a diversified system of contemporary art policies and actors, leveraging its institutional landscape and art-historical roots and placing Artissima at the centre of its strategy, distinct from flagship-museum models. However, unstable municipal allocations, failed integrations and the absence of systematic monitoring undermined strategic goals. The article argues that legitimising arts investment primarily through tourism rationales, an expression of the broader instrumentalisation of cultural policy (Vestheim, 1994; Belfiore, 2004), creates a structural trap: expectations of measurable impact that cultural organisations are ill-equipped to meet, where failure to demonstrate returns deepens vulnerability to disinvestment. The Turin case shows that this governance fragility (Le Galès, 1998; Pinson, 2009), is compounded when the urban narrative sustaining collective action among diverse actors is tied to a legitimisation rationale that evidence cannot sustain, eroding the coordinative capacity on which the system depends. Against this, the article advocates for an ecological approach (Holden, 2015) to cultural ecosystems as an alternative policy framework, one that recognises cultural and symbolic value alongside economic returns.

The third article (Chapter 4) is situated within scholarship on the instrumentalisation of cultural policy (Gray, 2007) and on export and internationalisation policies for the cultural and creative industries (Foord, 2009), a field in which commercial art galleries have remained overlooked despite their structural dependence on international fair participation (Lazzaro and Picchi, 2023). It presents a comparative historical analysis of 23 European policy instruments supporting galleries' participation in international art fairs across 19 national and sub-national areas. Drawing on policy documents, allocation data and 60 semi-structured interviews, it reconstructs how these instruments emerged and

migrated across policy domains and venues since 1985. The analysis first establishes that trade policy instruments were either absent or designed around eligibility criteria that excluded or constrained galleries. Through six thematic sequences, the paper traces how galleries secured support predominantly within the cultural policy domain: through succession from trade or foreign affairs venues; new instrument designs within cultural policy venues; or incremental conversion of existing cultural internationalisation measures. Limited trade-domain access was contingent on exceptional financial or political conditions rather than on a durable reclassification of galleries as a legitimate target group. The synchronic comparison of stated policy objectives shows that, among cultural-domain measures identified, gallery commercial development never appeared as a standalone objective and was consistently paired with national visibility; galleries secured access through frame bridging (Snow et al., 1986), presenting commercial fair participation as a vehicle for national cultural projection. The cultural domain, in turn, accommodated them on the condition that their activity could be rendered legible as serving the state's international visibility agenda. A companion article (Chapter 5) traces the full policy cycle of the Austrian gallery subsidy, showing how a measure framed as support for emerging artists continued to disproportionately benefit established galleries at elite fairs.