Here Be Dragons: How Art Market Platforms Encode Status into their Marketplaces' Wayfinding Tools

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Abstract:

This paper explores the evolution of status hierarchy within culturally-embedded marketplaces – here, international art fair (IAFs) – as captured in the maps of floor plans included in informational brochures produced by IAFs. These maps graphically depict the physical placement of galleries' exhibition booths at the IAF. These maps are made publicly available and distributed widely to IAF participants (e.g., galleries), expert art audiences (e.g., critics, curators, and collectors), and general-admissions attendees. Using a novel dataset derived from over 100 maps of multiple, independent IAFs spanning four decades this research examines how the quale of a firm's status can be recognized through the semiotic interpretation of the cartographic records of these cultural events and marketplaces — both in terms of their design and (un)intended uses. The data derives from assigning codes across 14 unique parameters (i.e., size, proximity to center or edges, lines of sights, intersection, etc.) to archival IAF maps' denotative elements (i.e., entrances, booths, restrooms, dining, guest services, etc.). The dataset also describes the individual characteristics of galleries (i.e., age, number of staff, HQ address, number of satellite retail outposts, and roster of artists, price range, etc.) These data are then combined and analyzed using a semiotic approach – based on redundant signs, symbols, and meanings (Barley 1983) – to interpreting the connotative elements associated with booth placement across maps over time. I propose that IAF organizers can (un)wittingly *encode* wayfinding tools with status markers, and that such depictions can express an additional dimension of social utility beyond a physical wayfinding function, but can also be understood as a type of socially-validated "dashboard"[1] to aid navigating the art market's constantly developing and consolidating status hierarchy. That this additional dimension can be well-defined by institutional / cultural entrepreneurs themselves, and provided the circumstances are such that both sides of the market initially benefit from such third-party arbitrage (Espeland and Sauder 2007; Kuwabara, Anthony, Horne 2017), helps to explain a social logic for such "curatorial" marketplaces (i.e., moderated apps and niche platforms), especially in cultural markets. Furthermore, I argue that even apparently benign and banal mediums such as maps of floorplans and color-coded aisles can serve to exhibit and reinforce a form of "segregated inclusion" (Accominotti, Storer, & Kahn 2018), whereby IAF organizers encode cues for active market participants whose participation in prior IAFs has given them experiential insight to recognize them, which can also serve to exclude the uninitiated / segment the art market. This research extends existing theories on status-based competition in markets (Podolny 1993) by presenting *not a static snapshot* of an established hierarchy (e.g., prestigious investment banks' headlining "tombstone" advertisements), but by developing a semiotic understanding of the *constitutive* role (prominent) placement – both physically and via abstract graphical depictions – plays in constructing and constituting a market's (visible) status hierarchy.

Emerging Questions
We are primarily interested in expanding thoughts around what we can infer given the expanse of data that we have collected. Below are some preliminary questions to spark some ideas.

- Do certain galleries prefer certain features over others? i.e. do high status galleries prefer more walls/less neighbors?
- How do galleries get placed over time? Do special groupings of booths form over time?
- What sort of patterns can be observed in terms of particular booths and their proximity to edges/features/entrance? i.e. are certain gallerists continually placed near desirable/undesirable features?

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[1] Defined as "a graphical user interface which provides at-a-glance views." Online: en.wikipedia.org.

- Do galleries exhibit any preference for aisles and their intersections? Do the Art Fair organizers place certain galleries in the same places over time?
- Do higher status galleries elect to be near one category or another?
- Which categories are most stable? Which are least stable?
- Do these categories imply anything about the life cycle of given gallery within the art market?

Structured Methodology

This project began with the collection of over 80 different maps from 5 different International Art Fairs (IAFs), some of which were listed online, and some of which came from the archives of the IAFs themselves. These maps were then hand coded according to a set of characteristics and traits that the authors believe to be intrinsically linked to status as it manifests in these fairs. For example, one might hypothesize that a larger sized booth at a prominent aisle intersection that is also near a VIP lounge might represent a higher status gallerist than a small booth tucked away in the corner of a fair. Once hand coded, we built a novel dataset from the ground up to reflect these qualities. Across nearly 13,000 individual booths we have a dataset that approaches 230,000 unique points. Below are the unique characteristics captured in the dataset, with each communicating explicit and implicit status signals.

Group 1: Instance #, Gallery Name, Booth #, Neighbors, Neighbor Instance, Number of Neighbors, Booth Shape, Number of Walls
Group 2: Potential Exterior Walls
Group 3: Booth Position within Block & Booth Size
Group 4: Proximity to Features, Proximity to Entrances, and Proximity to Edges

We have also arranged the data into a second dataset that shows gallerists' attendance patterns across art fairs. This data is organized by each specific gallery and illustrates every fair that they have attended. This gives us a picture into which galleries are invited to repeat at fairs, which can then be cross referenced to see if there is any correlation in terms of the status characteristics we have listed above. For example, does a gallery that has shown for 5 years in a row at Art Basel gain anything over time, such as a larger booth size, a more prominent location, or even a location nearer to other high-status galleries?

Potential Directions
- Studying patterns of location and co-location
  - Do trends emerge where certain gallerists are grouped together?
  - Do persistent groupings of booths form over time, and if so, are they grouped around particular characteristics?
  - Are there correlations between new entrants to fairs and their relative positioning? i.e. are newer entrants put in less desirable locations (close to edge/corner?)
- Morphology of status mobility over time
  - Do gallerists move in and out of certain status indicators over time? What trends and patterns can be observed in regard to how the galleries move within these indicators over time?
  - Are certain characteristics used by art fair organizers to reward booths for repeated appearances?
  - Do some characteristics exhibit more fluidity and movement than others?
  - Do external factors have any effect on the allocation of status characteristics?
- Characteristic Correlations
  - Are there associations or patterns between any of our characteristics?
  - Separate from analyzing through each booth, we would be curious to isolate individual characteristics to see if, for example, a larger booth size or a greater number of walls is correlated to higher status, or better positioning etc.
  - Are any correlations strong enough to rise to the level of predictive capabilities?
- Visualization of Data
  - How can we best visualize the dataset as we have it?
  - Can network analysis help us understand and depict this data spatially and representatively?