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ARTICLE

Cultivating Desire: Touch and Transgressive Thrill in the Art Fair

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Abstract

This article builds a framework for understanding both the observable and unobservable features of art fairs and how those structures are created through material and sensorial elements. It draws on the concept of atmospheres and broader discussions of affect to analyze the transgressive thrill present at art fairs, presenting an art fair as a space of commerce masked in the appearance of a museum-like space. This article explores how emotions and lures are structurally produced within the fair and how people are encouraged to collect. Within this space, a desire is cultivated via an opportunity to transgress the familiar norms of the museum environment, which fosters the development of a relationship between a person and an object. In this deeply affective space, rational responses to objects with unclear origins may be suspended. Through focusing on why people collect and how desire is generated we can better understand markets, including criminal markets, for highly desirable objects.

Resumen

Este artículo construye una estructura para comprender las características observables e inobservables de las ferias de arte y cómo estas se crean a través de elementos materiales y sensoriales. Esto se basa en el concepto de atmósferas y en amplias discusiones sobre el afecto para analizar la emoción transgresora presente en las ferias de arte. Este artículo presenta la feria de arte como un espacio de comercio enmascarado en la apariencia de un espacio similar a un museo. Explora cómo las emociones y las atracciones se producen estructuralmente dentro de la feria, y cómo se alienta a las personas a coleccionar. Dentro de este espacio, se cultiva un deseo a través de una oportunidad de transgredir las normas familiares del entorno del museo que fomenta el desarrollo de una relación entre persona y objeto. En este espacio profundamente afectivo, las respuestas racionales a objetos con orígenes poco claros pueden quedar en suspenso. Al centrarnos en por qué las personas coleccionan y cómo se genera el deseo, podemos comprender mejor los mercados, incluyendo los mercados criminales de objetos altamente deseables.

Keywords: affective atmosphere; art fairs; collecting; touch; transgression

Palabras clave: atmósfera afectiva; ferias de arte; coleccionismo; tacto; transgresión

Written signs and the iconography of "do not touch" are familiar features of the traditional museum environment. Typically, our visit to a museum is guided by a set of rules to which we, as visitors, collectively agree to adhere. Objects are mostly meant to be seen, and visitors are expected to display sensory restraint (Classen 2007). In a museum, the displayed object is viewed as "an object-information composite" (Dudley 2009:9), meaning that objects are seen as incomplete without the associated information. The interpretation and context of the object are more important than its physical properties (Dudley 2009), therefore eliminating the need for touch. This can contribute to a cognitive barrier between the visitor and the object that, together with physical barriers, limits the relationships that can form. In the

museum, physical barriers do not only affect how we view objects, such as at a distance and through glass, but they also govern our other senses such as touch: they outline the "right" way of engaging with these objects, thereby separating the senses. In contrast, art fair visitors will notice the engagement of multiple senses, touch included.

Large international art fairs serve as trade shows for the commercial art market. Even though they are often hosted in convention or exhibition and trade centers, art fairs are designed to hide the purely retail feel of the space. They enhance the experience by creating "a high-society cultural experience" (Yates and Mackenzie 2021:122) through different material and sensorial elements. For instance, the entrance to the European Fine Art Fair (TEFAF), which is held every year in Maastricht, is usually marked with a spectacular feature of a large installation of flowers, which provides a "transition moment into this 'art city'"(Tom Postma[1] quoted in Brown 2018). In this larger "art city," many individual art dealers have created booths that mimic the familiar atmosphere and physical characteristics of a museum-like space. Simultaneously, art dealers attempt to reduce the physical and cognitive distance between humans and objects by allowing objects to be approached in an intimate setting and, at times, by encouraging potential customers to touch them. Thus, human–object relationships are invited to form that extend beyond the sight-only barrier.

This article builds on the work done by Yates (2021) and Yates and Mackenzie (2021), who have explored the emotionally charged atmospheres of the art market and conceptualized art worlds as "desirescapes"—networks of objects that affect people, cultivate desire, and disturb reason. I take one "location" of these desirescapes—namely, an art fair—and look at it through the concept of affective atmospheres. I build a theoretical framework (unpacked in the following section) for understanding both the observable and unobservable features of art fairs—their sensory and physical characteristics that both rely on and mimic those of a mainstream, traditional museum space but also push against them in a few significant ways. More specifically, I explore the affective atmosphere of the art fair, which I argue provides a thrill and encourages people to transgress the usual social norms applied to antiques and antiquities outside the art fair space. In this article I focus on one aspect of this affective environment; namely, the importance of touch. I primarily look at art fairs such as the previously mentioned TEFAF and the Brussels Art Fair (BRAFA), which both display fine art, antiques, and design and are held annually. In these art fairs, it is possible to observe the handling of objects by dealers, collectors, buyers, and the general public, in contrast to the traditional museum setting in which touch is mostly forbidden.

My goal is to understand some of the structures that encourage people to consume certain types of objects without considering the legal or social norms that pertain to these objects. Why do people collect, how are they encouraged to do so, and how is this desire created and cultivated? If we can understand the dynamics at play and the deep allure of touching and possessing art in a sanctioned setting such as an art fair, we can by extension make some inferences about the allure in criminal scenarios as well; that is, if we understand the more ambiguous, fleeting structures guiding our behaviors in one setting, we can make some assumptions about motivations to acquire certain objects through means that are either illegal or are somewhat gray. Focusing on why people collect and how the desire is generated is important for understanding markets, including criminal markets.

A Note on Methods

While this is a theory-driven article, it is also based on some of my empirical work. Because atmospheres are "perceived and sensed through the body" (Bissell 2010:272), I conducted observational experiential fieldwork at art and art commerce spaces; specifically, high-end art fairs such as TEFAF and BRAFA, museums, and the Venice Biennale, an international cultural exhibition held every two years. The observational experiential approach was inspired by sensory ethnography (Pink 2009) and by research on atmospheres by Young (2019) and Fraser and Matthews (2021). Atmospheric methods (see Anderson and Ash 2015) "are rooted in a humanities tradition that is non-representational, sensory and subjective" (Fraser and Matthews 2021:5). As such this approach does not aspire to objectivity, because to understand and describe an atmosphere people must experience it themselves (Böhme 2013). This work is part of the larger European Research Council-funded Trafficking Transformations (TRANSFORM)

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Theoretical Building Blocks: Senses, Social Structure, Desirescapes, and Affective Atmospheres

Sensory and Emotional Aspects of Social Structure

Touch is emphasized by modern collectors as a key feature that distinguishes owning an object and seeing it in the museum setting (Thompson 2016). As Shutty writes (cited in Thompson 2016:105; emphasis in original), "This is why viewing one in a museum will never suffice. *It is all about the power to touch it at will*." The moment of touch is a transformative moment, during which human and object are interlocked in the beginning of a relationship. Touch, then, can be viewed as a key component in the development of an emotional connection between a person and an art object. It cultivates the desire. As Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos (2015:114) writes, "I touch something, it feels good, I want it. . . . Senses are all about emotions. Desire springs between me and the thing like scented mist."

Furthermore, some collectors want to own something that has been touched or made by a specific artist (see the interview with collector Joseph Pabst in Guardian Fine Art Services 2020). In the art fair setting, which is ultimately a commercial space, encouraging an emotional connection to form through touch increases the likelihood that a person will purchase the object (see Ranaweera [2021] on the importance of touch for consumers). In the past, artists themselves might have tried to create works of art that have a "touch appeal"; for example, by depicting enticing fabrics or jewels. Inducing potential buyers to "touch was an important step towards convincing to buy" (Classen 2017:30). As such in the art fair setting, emotions and lures are structurally produced and used with a specific goal in mind: to encourage consumption of the displayed objects. The sensuous qualities of collecting such as handling the objects are tied to ownership (Danet and Katriel 1994).

In social sciences, a social structure often has been conceived of as a set of rules, norms, and conventions (Knight 1998; Peter and Spiekermann 2011). A social structure plays an important role in decision-making. Social structure analysis has not always included sensory or emotional aspects, even though our sensorial experiences affect the way we experience the world and the way we behave (Walsh 2002; Warr 2021). In an art fair setting, these sensorial experiences can affect what people desire. In this article, I engage with the concept of *affective atmosphere* to better understand sensory and emotional aspects of structures that affect us, in this case using the institutional structures of the art market as an example.

Affective Atmospheres

As mentioned earlier, this work builds on Yates and Mackenzie's (2021) idea of desirescapes. Through this concept they introduce "the thing-networks" (Yates and Mackenzie 2021:130) that cultivate desire and influence people. Although in their work Yates and Mackenzie allude to affect and atmospheres, their focus is on objects of desire at the center of the network; for example, see Yates and Peacock (2022) on charismatic T. rex. Through this work, I add to the concept of desirescapes by exploring how other material, sensory, and atmospheric elements contribute to this lure and desire and how they are structurally produced. Affective atmosphere is a useful concept in exploring these structures.

Atmospheres are "spaces configured in the totality of sensory information" (McClanahan and South 2020:13): They connect people, space, and things (Bille et al. 2015:33). Although we might think of atmospheres as personal or subjective, some researchers have argued that it is incorrect to do so (Bille et al. 2015; Young 2019), because "an atmosphere is never exclusively a psychological phenomenon . . . nor solely an objective thing out there" (Bille et al. 2015:32). An atmosphere is something that is collectively made and experienced. Even though individual visitors experience art fairs in slightly different ways, there is a commonality present in the form of an atmosphere that is shared by them all (see Anderson 2009:79). Fraser and Matthews (2021:1) in their definition emphasize the agentic qualities of atmosphere by highlighting its ability "to act in a quasi-agentic manner." Following this, the atmosphere of certain events like an art fair can be so overpowering that even crime can be experienced differently and even misinterpreted (see Yates and Bērziņa [2025] on a jewel heist at TEFAF[2]).

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An atmosphere might seem like an ambiguous concept; however, rather than being a fully ambiguous concept, "our language and disciplines" have been constructed with a particular idea of the world where "the sensory has been relegated to an amorphous, intangible, and unmeasurable realm" (Herrity et al. 2021:xxiv). It seems that we lack the vocabulary to describe this phenomenon, and in some cases it is dismissed because it is subjectively experienced rather than measurable and observable at a distance.

Yet, atmospheres can be mobilized for a particular purpose, such as consumerism (see Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos 2019), making their understanding important for understanding human behavior. It is possible to create an environment that *encourages* specific associations, emotions, feelings, and actions. We can conceptualize this as a way of re-creating key visual and physical structures and encouraging the emergence of a specific atmosphere that mimics a particular space while also controlling for thrill and transgressions that normally would not be allowed in the original space. We can consider art fairs as one example.

Art fairs mimic a few familiar attributes of a museum experience; for example, visitors encounter artworks in pseudo-galleries, where artworks are displayed on walls, exhibited on pedestals, and accompanied by informative labels. Attendees then may relate art fairs to the mainstream, traditional museums that they already know because "our brains tend to relate incoming sensations to imagery of other events or sensations already in our memory" (Solomon et al. 2010:132). Thus, an art fair gets associated with a museum but with a key difference that I focus on here: the ability to touch the objects. A rule and the norm of "do not touch" in the museum embody social values such that culturally valuable things should not be touched and instead should be preserved for future generations. Yet in the art fairs, this rule is subverted, making art fairs appealing for those who want a closer engagement with the objects.

Although I focus on engagement with antiques and antiquities, I also observed some handling of fine art such as paintings during my fieldwork. For example, several times I observed art dealers who took a painting off the wall and flipped it around a few times to show all its angles to potential buyers. I also saw visitors either reaching out to touch displayed statues or other larger objects or picking up smaller antiquities and turning them over in their hands. At the booth selling Egyptian antiquities, I observed one visitor picking up a small object and then struggling to put it back on a small plastic holder because it was not quite stable.

A Specific Idea of a Museum

Throughout this article I refer to a "traditional museum" atmosphere that the high-end art fairs mimic. However, I do not imply that they mimic the latest developments or progressive museum environments that are developing new ways of communicating with visitors by designing participatory experiences and evolving into spaces of learning for different types of visitors (Agbisit 2021; Długosz 2022; Jelinčić et al. 2022). Instead, the high-end art fairs mimic a specific idea of a museum—a traditional museum that hosts old collections and has not changed much in its layouts and display practices, in some ways remaining true to its origins as a cabinet of curiosities[3] (Sani 2013). Some of these museums, however, are working to make their collections relevant to contemporary issues (see as an example Sani [2013] on the Teylers Museum in Haarlem, the Netherlands), but the high-end art fairs discussed here mimic the traditional museum space: It is a space "of pre-eminence of an object" (Długosz 2022:157). In contrast to the evolving museum world that is becoming "community-centered" (Vermeeren et al. 2018), the traditional museum is a space that is centered on the object or collection.

Through their associations with this particular idea of a museum, high-end art fairs lend credibility and a mark of quality to the displayed objects, as well as add value to them. In a traditional museum setting, physical interactions with objects are not compatible with scientific values and conservation; therefore, touch by the visitors is mostly prohibited. In an art fair setting, touch is used as a sales technique; there touch is elevated.

Brief Note on Harms

The most common definition of crime is an act that breaks the law. By doing so, however, we are inadvertently excluding behavior that is harmful but legal, because it does not defy the law. Art fairs are commercial enterprises, and by extension it can be argued that like many consumer spaces, there

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is a chance that they can become "implicated in a multitude of harms" (Kindynis 2021:624). There are relationships that exist between consumerism and "various forms of expressive and acquisitive criminality" that have been conceptualized as the crime–consumerism nexus (Hayward and Kindynis 2013:123). Walsh (2002; emphasis in original) notes the use of a technique known as atmospherics in shops to "reinforce the target audience's *general perception* of a given store in order to play upon personal insecurities that stem from the discrepancy between the shopper's actual life and their *idealized self-image*."

Many booths within art fairs mimic a traditional museum setting but use the ability to touch objects at will and at any time as a sales technique. They show the way these objects could be interacted in a way that—normally outside this space in a traditional museum setting that they mimic—would be seen as transgressive and linked to concepts of damage. Furthermore, art fairs play into the "idealized self-image" of the buyers, because owning an object is about "the power to touch it at will" (Shutty cited in Thompson 2016:105). This self-image is also coupled with the idea of being a part of the rarefied art world; as Artnet senior reporter Katya Kazakina notes in an interview (Art Angle Podcast 2024), a very large group of people are buying art "driven by the social cachet of being in the art world." Through this, although touch-as-transgression is not a crime, it fuels and sustains the desire for these objects, which in some instances can come with certain harms. For example, this desire can promote harmful behavior not only toward the wider material environment but also can cause a range of harms, such as negative effects on physical and mental health or even criminal harms on an individual level due to the pressures of consumerism and wanting to acquire the objects of desire; see Simončič (2019) on consumerism as a mechanism of social control.

Atmospheres of Museums and Art Fairs

Atmosphere of the Museum

Museums as institutions are closely associated with their mission of collecting, preserving, and displaying natural and cultural heritage objects, as well as educating the public (Adam 2021; Wood and Latham 2011). Although they have been described as "an excellent setting for multi-sensory interactions" (Wood and Latham 2011:53), a typical museum setting is primarily visually oriented, with a few exceptions such as touch boxes for children or specifically curated exhibits for visually impaired people. This has not always been the case: eighteenth-century diaries and journals show that museum visitors of that period regularly handled the displayed objects (Classen and Howes 2006). However, it has been argued that these were mostly "elite" visitors, and when the working class gained access to the museums in the nineteenth century, touch became forbidden (Candlin 2008). Candlin (2008:18) argues that, rather than viewing this change as "a wholesale transition" from multisensory museum experience to primarily a visual experience, touch and the importance of the touch have "always depended upon who was touching the collections and in what capacity." Not surprisingly then, the "do not touch" sign in museums is associated with "snobbery, elitism, and restriction of the art experience" (Khayami 2016:187).

Adding to this problematic legacy of a privileged touch, a museum collection can be seen as a carefully chosen sample of reality, in which experts have made judgments regarding which objects to display (Cameron 1971); as such the displayed objects are seen as "more enduring, valuable, legitimate, and of higher quality than those outside it" (Jeffers 2003:110). Thus, we as an audience make our own judgments already knowing that the object is deemed important by experts and that these chosen objects have essentially "been enshrined" (Cameron 1971:21). An association with a museum adds a certain mark of quality to an object, potentially increasing its value on the art market. The object might not have reached the status of a museum object (at least not yet), but through this association, it is included in the wider network of objects that have reached that status and have been "enshrined."

Even the use of the word "museum" has its value. Objects offered on the art market to private collectors are regularly described by their sellers as "museum quality"; for example, Colnaghi's antiquities department on its website describes it as specializing in "exquisite museum-quality works of art." Therefore, it is fair to argue that museums are seen as symbols, "recognized and understood as

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such, even by its youngest members" (Jeffers 2003:108). Although there has been an expansion of so-called new museums (see Message 2006) and an increase in the number of private museums (see Adam 2021), art fairs, as discussed in later sections, aim to re-create the atmosphere of traditional museums because associations with them lend credibility, a mark of quality, and add value to the displayed objects.

What is the atmosphere of a museum? Classen (2017:1) succinctly describes the atmosphere of a museum as "temple-like." Of course, although in the museum works of art can be argued to be the main event, a museum's atmosphere is not limited to art alone. It also includes lighting and décor, architecture, and even the "ideas and affects that fill the air" (Urbach 2010:14). In other words, the atmosphere is "configured in the totality of sensory information" (McClanahan and South 2020:13). As such an atmosphere of a particular event like an exhibition is "to be felt and inhabited, not only seen" (Urbach 2010:14).

Sensory restraint also contributes to the atmosphere of a museum. Artifacts are mostly to be seen rather than handled; even a light touch is seen almost as "an act of sacrilege" (Classen 2017:1). This impression is deeply ingrained in our thinking. A BritainThinks (2013:13) study found that many people already in their childhood had formed associations with the museums as "distanced from the visitors, full of velvet ropes and 'do not touch' signs." These associations are so strong that they are carried into adulthood. However, early museums began as private collections and cabinets of curiosities, both of which allowed the privileged few to handle the objects (Azimi 2015; Classen 2007). Nevertheless, as modern scientific inquiry changed, sight was given dominance, while other nonvisual senses lost their importance and were "relegated to the realm of . . . the 'savage'" (Classen 2007:907). In museum settings, physical interactions with objects were not compatible with scientific values and with the increasing concern for conservation.

All this contributed toward the traditional museum setting as we know it, where touch is mostly forbidden. Vision is seen as producing "knowledge in an abstract form (e.g., the fact)" (Lam 2012:162), and "sight has a high cultural value in Western society" (Howes and Classen 2014:1). Many museums and art galleries reinforce this value of vision by separating the senses and by putting them in hierarchical order, where touch is the lowest. Dominique Cordellier, head of the Louvre's graphic arts department, has said, "Humans are greasy animals. . . . Not touching reflects a concern for the common good" (quoted in Azimi 2015).

However, there are spaces in museums that provide experiences typically not offered by museums; namely, a museum shop. As Macdonald (2012:52) describes it, in a museum shop people are "released from the haptic deprivation of the museum (at least, of most museums)." Shops are part of larger museum economies. They are a part of a museum's financial economy by providing additional income. They are also a part of a sensory economy by allowing both for the visual stimulation started by a museum's exhibits to continue and for the "satiation of some of the other senses, especially touch" (Macdonald 2012:52). This helps generate an atmosphere of excitement that reinvents "mundane activity such as shopping . . . into moments of thrill" (Hudson 2015:293). It is important, however, that museum shops index their relationships to museums, because if they fail to do so, they risk coming off as "just shops—nothing more than profiteering enterprises" (Macdonald 2012:45). Similarly, art fairs also create a relationship to something more than just a commercial space: they make a link to a museum-like space. One of the dealers participating in TEFAF 2020 described its feel as entering "a museum that's for sale" (quoted in Reyburn 2020).

Atmosphere of the Art Fair

Art fairs have been described as a crucial component of the contemporary art market (Schultheis 2017; Yogev and Grund 2012). From only a handful of art fairs in the post–World War II era, art fairs grew from around 150 viable art fairs in 2011 to 365 art fairs in 2020 (Gerlis 2021). However, the pandemic had a dampening effect on art fairs, and numbers have declined since then (McAndrew 2023). Art fairs are commercial platforms that bring together different actors in the art market, such as galleries, artists, collectors, art lovers, academics, curators, and art critics (Morgner 2014; Rodner and Thomson 2013; Yogev and Grund 2012). Furthermore, for artists, participation in art fairs or, even more importantly,

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international art events such as the Venice Biennale has become a way to "legitimize their work and gain symbolic power" (Rodner and Thomson 2013:66). Similar to a museum, the judgment has been made by the dealers regarding what to display, hence communicating to visitors that these artists/works are legitimate and worthy of attention. For visitors, art fairs make "the rarefied art world seem more accessible" (Gerlis 2021:13).

Interestingly, although art fairs seem more accessible and less intimidating for the public than other high-end art commerce spaces, at the same time they emphasize the elite, high-end feeling of the art world. Gerlis (2021:11) describes the first art fairs as "modest experiments" that over time "wowed" their attendees "in no small measure because of the opulence on show." Art fairs also also affect and bring benefits to the local communities and economy (Gerlis 2021; Yogev and Grund 2012). However, most art fairs are first and foremost places of commerce: they are "an effort to move the product in whatever way possible" (Hearn quoted in Frieze 1995). Despite this, there does exist some uneasiness that comes from trying to put a price on untradeable goods, with some gallerists noting that they do not want their galleries to appear "like a supermarket," but instead they want "to represent and mediate the art" (Schultheis 2017:5).

To do so, associations with museums are important for art fairs. For example, writing about Foire internationale d'art contemporain (FIAC), an international contemporary art event held annually in Paris in the Grand Palais,[4] Gerlis (2021:27) noted, "No other large-scale art fair boasts such a landmark venue, that, because of its status as a museum, confers a seriousness onto the inherently commercial activity of an art fair." Although not every art fair can be associated with such venues, what they can do is replicate an atmosphere of the museum because atmospheres can be staged to affect and guide people's behavior (Bille et al. 2015; Böhme 2013). Art fairs in particular mimic the atmosphere of the specific idea of a traditional museum space, with added opulence associated with the art world itself. Gerlis (2021:36) describes TEFAF as consisting of "lavish booths, flower-lined walls, deep carpets and fine canapés." Objects in art fairs are presented in carefully designed settings. These settings mimic an environment where a potential buyer might expect to see these objects outside the high-end art fair space, such as a temple, church, tomb, or, more often than not, a museum (Yates 2021). Although visitors are surely encouraged to buy the displayed objects, it is most certainly not an atmosphere of commerce, even when art fairs are held in a convention or trade center. With some exceptions, there are no price tags, nor is there a cash register. Instead, the dealers' booths mimic the visual and social aspects of the exact type of museum spaces that are relevant for the objects being presented. People move through the fair as they would move through different galleries in a museum. They can buy a fair guide at the door and a fair map that resembles a museum map. They might pay an entry fee like in a museum, which is not something one does in a shop. Many attend to simply look at the art and have no intention of making a purchase.

However, despite the art fair having the overall atmosphere of a museum, there are subtle differences in its physical space. These subtle differences lead people to the moment that in a traditional museum setting would be seen as a transgression; specifically, touch-as-transgression, of boundary crossing, and thus to the formation of the beginnings of a relationship with an object. Collector Joseph Pabst (quoted in Guardian Fine Art Services 2020) in an interview mentions Richard Renaldi's series "Touching Strangers" and describes how there "is something compelling about seeing two unknown people touching. It is similar to how an object and a collector can end up together through chance and circumstance." Matt Ducklo (quoted in Mullaney 2013), a photographer who has photographed people on touch tours at different museums, observed that most of his subjects "find that experiencing art through touch is meaningful."

Additionally, in an art fair there are significantly fewer physical barriers between people and objects. Some booths set up private spaces for people to be alone with an object, which usually is still on a pedestal and has a museum-style label but also has a pseudo-intimacy that traditional museums do not have. Although there are no cash registers, there is often a seating area where business can be discussed. However, even these too often have the appearance of a research library space (a feature of museums), with reference books scattered around on the table.

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Crossing Invisible Boundaries: Human–Object Relationships in the Art Fair Setting

Yates and Mackenzie (2021) propose thinking about objects at art fairs as being presented within assemblages of objects that provide context for the displayed artwork. The "coordination" of the context-setting objects is important because it facilitates the creation of a "potent object-network" that encourages the purchase of the displayed object (Yates and Mackenzie 2021:123). For example, Asian antiquities may be displayed with flowers such as orchids or on the background of tropical imagery, all designed to evoke an "exotic object landscape" (Yates and Mackenzie 2021:123). Art fairs are essentially places of commerce; yet, because in the art world "commerce is a dirty word" (Wetzler 2011), art fairs create an atmosphere that masks the sensory experiences that we associate with commerce while still allowing commerce to happen. Perceptions "can be manipulated by carefully controlling sensations" (Krishna 2013:14).

Essentially, art fairs are staged by drawing on similarities with traditional museums and then by moving beyond the museum space to achieve an affect. They structurally produce lures and emotions and through them play an important role in generating desire. The atmospheres are created to envelop visitors. In many ways a visit to an art fair is a full sensory experience—there are soft carpets, flowers, sounds (sometimes classical music), and the taste and smell of expensive foods and drinks. To understand atmospheres, we must address "the co-existence of embodied experience and the material environment" (Bille et al. 2015:36). Based on her work in northern Cyprus, Navaro-Yashin (2012:159) argues that "affect is produced neither by the materialities nor by the inner world alone; it is produced through their interaction." From this it is possible to argue that the affective part comes in when humans and nonhumans meet. Brian Massumi (2015:2) uses the concept of "affect" to refer to the "margin of manoeuvrability": the potential of what bodies might do, in addition to what they already are doing or have done. As Shouse (2005:2) explains, "It is a moment of unformed and unstructured potential." This, I argue, is what art fairs exploit. Although collective affects of atmospheres are "not reducible to the individual bodies that they emanate from" (Anderson 2009:80), atmospheres can be manipulated to achieve specific goals by "tapping into people's emotions and affects" (Bille et al. 2015:37).

Here, it is important to note the differences between emotion, feeling and affect. Drawing on Massumi, Shouse (2005:1; emphasis in original) writes that feelings "are *personal* and *biographical*, emotions are *social*, and affects are *prepersonal*." As Shouse explains, "An emotion is the projection/display of a feeling," whereas "affect is a non-conscious experience of intensity" (2005:2). Affect exists "somewhere between or before experience and cognition" (Young 2019:766). Massumi (2015:5) describes emotion as "a very partial expression of affect," whereas affect "as a whole . . . is the virtual co-presence of potentials." Affect might be an ambiguous concept, but when it comes to art collecting, this ambiguity helps us understand people's motivations to collect and possess certain objects. For instance, collectors often talk about objects choosing them, feeling love for these objects, or highlighting other emotional dynamics pertaining to collecting (Ortiz 2006; Pittman 2004).

Art fairs are parts of "desirescapes" consisting of networks of objects that affect people, cultivate desire, and disturb reason (Yates and Mackenzie 2021). However, here I want to highlight the importance of senses in building human–object relationships that inspire consumption and, with that, run a risk of creating a range of possible harms. Turhal and Natali (2023:131), drawing on Vannini and colleagues (2012), note that "as humans who are corporeal entities who live in material environments, we are constantly engaged in sensory work." High-end art fairs and exhibitors' booths within them are created to be an immersive experience (Daletchine 2023). They signal that you are somewhere special and promote consumption through engagement with various senses. Although high-end art fairs provide multisensory experiences, one sense is especially used, in stark contrast to other art spaces such as museums and exhibitions. In an art setting visual cues are important, but there is something about touching the object that appears to have an affective pull on people.

Art collectors themselves emphasize the importance of the touch and the lure of the object; they acknowledge that in the museum setting the touching feels like a transgression. As Theodor (1996:8) wrote, "I remarked that I missed the forbidden pleasure of touching, holding, turning and scrutinizing any of the pieces displayed behind glass." Similarly, today when digitization and technology have powerfully affected the art world, many collectors still want to physically interact with objects, "to touch and feel" (Ang 2021).

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However, in a traditional, mainstream museum setting, not touching is an artifice that adds to our measure of value. Not touching reflects concern for the preservation for future generations and therefore adds to our sense of the artwork's value: Culturally and financially valuable things should not be touched. In an art fair, being allowed to touch valuable objects is used as a sales technique and adds attraction to the potential owner—they are buying the right to touch the objects at will and at any time. This can contribute to the previously discussed crime–consumerism nexus: although many if not all are allowed to touch the objects, not everyone can actually afford them, or there might be only one piece of a particular type of object that many desire but only one can own, therefore creating a possible motivation to acquire similar objects in different ways outside an art fair setting. Even though commerce is concealed, it does not mean that no harm can arise from it. As Saltz (2018) notes, art fairs "have become like great malls curated to lure people in without focusing on business." Therefore, although commerce might be hidden, it is still bubbling underneath the surface as the institutional structures of an art fair interact with and generate the desire to promote sales and commerce.

When it comes to touching art, there is an aspect of breaking deeply engrained taboos that visitors may experience as exhilarating. Khayami (2016) recorded responses of artists, visitors, and art professionals to a charity's BlindArt Sense & Sensuality project that encouraged exploration of contemporary art through all senses, particularly touch. Visitors noted that it felt "really liberating" and like "overthrowing years of not being allowed to touch art" (Khayami 2016:188). Even an art professional, a photographer who regularly handles art, noted, "There is still nervousness around touching art; like forbidden fruit, it can't be done" (Khayami 2016:189). Touching art is more than just about the physical act itself; it is inevitably linked to "cultural and personal associations" (Howes and Classen 2014:8).

By attempting to avoid the commercial feeling of what is essentially a commercial platform, art fairs create "a high-society cultural experience" (Yates and Mackenzie 2021:122), where the displayed objects are often presented in a setting that evokes the atmosphere of a museum. By intentionally mimicking chosen attributes of a museum and combining those with a feeling of the high-end art world, art fairs have created a place that allows types of engagements with objects that are thrilling and that outside this space might be considered transgressive. Atmospheres created through sensory and emotive elements can generate excitement that transforms mundane actions such as shopping into something thrilling (see Hudson 2015). Of course, people who attend art fairs might be more comfortable with handling objects, yet even in this environment exclusionary practices are evident. A Swiss art collector in an interview stated that "a person who wants to buy culture should also have culture" (quoted in Schultheis 2017:12). Therefore, there is a level of skill and thrill present even in the high-end art fair for those who might be more used to this environment. When someone is reaching out to touch objects in the art fair setting, there are some risks involved, such as damaging the object either by dropping it or staining it; there is also the risk of being judged as not having enough cultural capital to truly appreciate the object (see Bourdieu 1986). As DeMarrais and Robb (2013:16) note, "In class-stratified societies . . . not all people are equally able to decode or to appreciate art." Similarly, Braden (2016:1483), following Bourdieu, writes that those considered as having a good taste "have greater cultural capital, a symbolic currency that individuals exchange for rewards of status and power, thus reproducing social mobility through nonfinancial assets." This transgressive thrill of touching objects also has elements of skill required—not necessarily only practical skills of how to handle objects but also cultural capital. This thrill and skills are important if we consider that cultural capital is required for social mobility in the high-end art world.

The combination of people, space, objects, and different sensory stimuli creates an affective atmosphere that envelops art fairs' visitors and participants themselves. Unobservable structures, sensory modalities, and material relations deform and prompt our perceptions, emotions, and interpretations. Art fairs create a setting that seems high-end, trustworthy, and safe both to interact with these objects and to consume them. In other words, high-end art fairs have created a deeply affective environment, where rational responses to antiquities with unclear origins might be suspended. In a way they have achieved the creation of atmosphere as defined by Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos (2015). He describes an atmosphere as "all-inclusive, safe and perfectly sheltered lawscape" that has concealed itself as a non-lawscape" (Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos 2015:107).[5] In it, "we and our desires are captured" (Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos 2015:107).

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Wall (2019:148) notes "a cyclical relation between atmosphere and behavior," meaning that places and atmospheres play an important role in creating a set of norms and values that those who are present there should follow, yet the same people re-create the place and atmosphere by conforming to them. It is a self-feeding loop. Through this relationship between atmospheres, places, and humans, behavior, attitudes, and values that perhaps outside that space might be interpreted differently become normalized. While TEFAF prides itself on its vetting process and calls it "one of the main pillars of TEFAF Maastricht's success," high-end art fairs encourage people to consume certain types of objects without considerations of the legal or social norms that pertain to these objects outside this unique place. Although I by no means imply that a visit to a high-end art fair necessarily ends with someone committing a crime, what I suggest is that this setting makes people more susceptible to consuming/acquiring certain types of objects without asking uncomfortable questions about the potential harms or even crimes that might come bundled with the object of desire. It is not a setting that inspires questions; it is a setting that exerts influence on an unconscious level; for similar observations see Walsh (2002) on marketing tactics that affect person's behaviors and beliefs; also see Healy (2014) on shopping as involuntary vulnerability.

Conclusion: Affective Atmosphere and Thrill of Touch

Katz (1988:9), when trying to understand the criminal experience, suggests asking, "What are people trying to do when they commit a crime?" As I pointed out, I am not suggesting that art fairs inspire crime to happen; instead, specific feelings, emotions, and lures are structurally produced in an art fair setting, and these structures play a crucial role in generating desire. However, inspired by Katz, we can also ask how this desire translates into why people want to collect and how it could potentially translate into the trafficking of antiquities. What are people trying to achieve through collecting?

In a high-end art fair setting that I discussed here, primarily focusing on antiques and antiquities, touch is used as a sales technique. It is elevated to a privileged, elite level, where arguably only a privileged few can handle the objects, and touch adds attraction to the potential owners: they are buying the right to touch the objects at will and at any time. Mathiowetz (2010) argues that touch symbolizes luxury consumption, and as such the "felt side of luxury" is also linked to inequality. Although the objects are accessible to all, it is only the privileged few who can afford and truly possess them: not everyone has the means to fulfill this desire. Taken further, atmospheres and sensory experiences associated with luxury and exclusiveness can exert a pressure on people to conform to these atmospheres to fit in or crave more than what they have, even when it is not within their financial or social means. This can potentially lead someone to engage in behavior that is illegal or in a gray area to fulfill the desire to fit in or to possess something that is one of a kind.

Ter Keurs, a professor of museums, collections, and society, notes in an interview (in van der Spek 2023) that "the desire to possess is human. With fanatical collectors there is often an underlaying sense of lack or loss." Similarly, Belk and colleagues (1988:550) highlight some of the motives for collecting such as "seeking power, knowledge, reminders of one's childhood, prestige, mastery, and control." The notions of power and control are linked to collecting and to sense of touch. The desire to possess, to handle, to own, and to control at least part of one's life (via objects and collection) is cultivated. Through touch and its "boundary–blurring properties" (Howes and Classen 2014:8), art fairs provide a thrill and a space to push against societal norms and rules that apply to valuable objects outside this designed "safe" space. It is a guided and allowed shedding of those norms, and touch in this space disrupts "an ordered existence" (Lyng 1990:857) of the outside space where society has decided "when and what we must *not* see, or touch, or taste" (Howes and Classen 2014:5; emphasis in original). In this atmosphere or in this space of "successful, invisibilisation of the law" (Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos 2015:107), outside rules and norms are suspended.

This suspension can arguably have unintended consequences that can lead to engagement with antiques and antiquities with illegal origins. Collectors' and buyers' perceptions might be influenced to such an extent that they might be unlikely or unwilling to ask uncomfortable questions in situations outside the high-end art fairs where objects might have surfaced on the market through illicit or illegal means. Deterrence depends on the "sanction risk perceptions" (Mackenzie 2025). Deterrence strategies

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"work by aiming to enforce the law" (Brisman and South 2023:533). Yet as the example discussed here highlighted, it is possible to create a specific atmosphere where law fades into the background, desire is cultivated, and perceptions are manipulated. For example, in other settings, newly "discovered" antiquities with unclear or missing paper trails can be mixed in with objects with traceable origins. Objects with traceable origins along with sensorial and atmospheric elements can appear to legitimize those objects whose origins are perhaps illegal or somewhat ambiguous. People are unlikely to be deterred if these specific atmospheres influence the perception process of the collectors or would-be collectors, who can start to believe that consumption of these objects is always safe, sheltered, and unproblematic. The consumption of these objects is more than just about the objects themselves. As the importance of touch shows, physical engagements with the objects are important but other emotional, sensorial, and atmospheric aspects influence human behavior and decision-making.

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, while a social structure is often conceived of as a set of rules and norms, by focusing on atmosphere and senses we can better reflect our lived realities and understand some of the unobservable yet present structures shaping and affecting human behavior. By analyzing an art fair experience through the concept of atmospheres, we can gain a more nuanced understanding of how people are encouraged to consume certain types of objects without considering the legal or social norms that pertain to these objects outside this carefully curated bubble. By attuning to the sensory aspects of the institutional structures of the art world, we can add richness to our understanding of what drives people to collect and to possess objects of art. We can understand how the desire is generated and sustained through sensuous, subconscious influences. More extensive empirical work is required to test the theoretical framework presented in this article. Specifically, a methodology should be developed to better understand the atmospheric, sensory qualities of potentially criminogenic or gray markets and to create a more nuanced understanding of unseen market drivers.

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Notes

1. Tom Postma Design is an architectural design company based in Amsterdam, which has been creating designs for museums, galleries, boutiques, and art fairs such as TEFAF for many years.

2. The jewel heist at TEFAF Maastricht took place on June 28, 2022. The costumes worn by the thieves and the muted reaction and calmness of the many onlookers captivated traditional and social media. For outsiders, the costumes and the muted reaction appeared absurd, but as Yates and Bērziņa (2025) explain, they made perfect sense in this highly affective space. The thieves responded and conformed to the atmosphere allowing them to enter the fair without anyone paying much attention, and the same setting influenced many onlookers to misinterpret the violet jewel heist as something else entirely.

3. Of note is that during TEFAF Maastricht 2024, one of the galleries had a display cabinet made to look like a cabinet of curiosities filled with small objects; its bottom part featured copies of the gallery's own in-house journal.

4. This has now come to an end, and its spot has been taken by Art Basel. For more details see https://web.archive.org/web/20240517114402/https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2022/01/26/war-of-the-fairs-fiac-loses-its-venue-as-art-basel-owner-moves-into-pariss-grand-palais-with-new-contemporary-art-fair.

5. In a lawscape every observable and unobservable structure is regulated by law. Law is all around us, it guides our behaviors, and our lives are so saturated with it that it becomes invisible; law is "there but not there, imperceptible yet all-determining" (Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos 2013:36).

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