The Observatory on Contemporary Art

Premises:

"[...] as far as appearances were concerned, anything could be a work of art [...]"

Arthur Danto, After the End of Art, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1998

In the last fifteen years the undeniable and deflagrating expansion of the possibilities for the artistic production has come with a more evident growth of the system of verification, validation, valorization and finally consecration of art works and of their creators, operated by a more and more extended ensemble of galleries, museums and collectors working on a global scale.

As the defining and conceptual understanding of "art" is fading in contemporary culture today, its empirical correlation and a shared sense of the assertion are blurring as well. A disturbing lack of determination is felt, the "everything is possible" does not always give shape to sense and **legitimacy**.

What substitutes the conceptual and defining vacuum is a **system of mediation**, called for convenience the Art System, whose evolution is converging towards the formation of an industrial, integrated medium (on multiple market channels and networking relations) that becomes a (luxury and research) sub-component of the integrated global "mediascape"*.

*Arjun Appadurai, Modernity At Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1996

What is art?", it has been decided to undertake a long path to understand how art is expressed, instituted, practiced, thought, legitimized and finally also valued in our contemporaneity. A path tended to look behind the curtain under the tablecloth of a lavish feast and, maybe, even in the kitchen. It is a research not aimed at finding out the winners against the losers of today or of tomorrow, but to see what happens to the cookers, to their hands, to their people and to their work.

We started listening to some **artists' voices** that coexist inside this scenario.

"We live in a world of suffering in which evil is rampant, a world whose events do not confirm our Being, a world that has to be resisted. It is in this situation that the aesthetic moment offers hope. That we find a crystal or a poppy beautiful means that we are less alone, that we are more deeply inserted into existence than the course of a single life would lead us to believe. [...] For an instance the Energy of one's perception becomes inseparable from the energy of the creation. The aesthetic emotion we feel before a man-made object – such as the white bird – is a derivative of the emotion we feel before nature. [...] All the languages of art have been developed as an attempt to transform the instantaneous into the permanent. Art supposes that beauty is not an exception – is not in despite of – but is the basis for an order. [...] Art does not imitate nature, it imitates a creation, sometime to propose an alternative world, sometimes simply to amplify, to confirm, to make social the brief hope offered by nature. Art is an organized response to what nature allows us to glimpse occasionally. Art sets out to transform

the potential recognition into an unceasing one. It proclaims man in the

hope of receiving a surer reply... the transcendental face of art is

John Berger, Selected Essays, Ed. Geoff Dyer, New York, Vintage book, 2003

always a form of prayer."

"Reality, the truth about life and the mystery of beauty are all the same and they are the first concern of everyone. I want to emphasize the fact that we all have the same concern, but the artist must know exactly what the experience is. He must pursue the truth relentlessly. [...] The manipulation of materials in art work is a result of this state of mind."

Agnes Martin, Writings Schriften. Ed. Dieter Schwarz, Ostfildern, Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2005

"Art is the transmission without world of what is the same in all human beings. In art all remains silent. The silence of the victim of the violence in Columbia, my silence as an artist and the silence of the viewer' come together during the precise moment of contemplation and only in the very space where that contemplation occurs. The silent contemplation of each viewer permits the life seen in the work to reappear. Change takes place, as if the experience of the victim were reaching out, beyond, as if making a bridge over the space between one person and another. To make this connection possible is the important thing...it is conscience and liberty because it is, primordially, memory. The experience is intimate and can only be made visible in the space, the space permits that the experience endures. It is because of this that the work of art preserves life, offering the possibility that an intimacy develops in a human being when she or he receives something of the experience of another. Art sustains the possibility of an encounter between people who come from quite distinct realities."

Doris Salcedo, Unland/Doris Salcedo (exh. cat.), San Francisco, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1999

The research

The Observatory for Contemporary Art presents the result of an exploration carried out on the visibility, the recognition and the processes of verification of the contemporary art production in the last years, from 2005 to 2013. This time span gives the opportunity to consider the impact of the global crisis of 2008 and, simultaneously, of the massive increase in the art market's geographical scope after the emergence of the BRIC scenes.

As a primary unit of analysis to observe the dynamics of the art market we consider the Art Basel fair, monitoring the artists brought by all the galleries that participate to the event. The fair was chosen due to its worldwide relevance as a commercial venue for modern and contemporary art: a yearly reference point in which dealers, collectors, experts, as well as the general public, spot what is emerging and worthy of collective and professional attention. The dynamics recognizable there can tell us something about the policies implemented by the top segment of the art dealing world. The commercial and cultural intentions embedded in these policies shape the way in which the art system interprets the globalization and find an answer to the dimensional growth of the market, with all the possible implications on the meanings and nature of the visual arts as a whole.

We then complemented the data with the list of all the collective and solo exhibitions held, in the same years, in 33 selected contemporary art museums worldwide.

The final dataset includes information about more than 15,500 artists, 730 galleries, 33 museums and nearly 5,000 exhibits.

In the last decade the international visual art market has been characterized by a dimensional take off, coupled with a challenging shock of its organisational stability. A significant growth of the exchanged volumes, an upgrade of the overall market values followed by a sharp downturn and a surge in the number of dealers, mediators and institutions (fairs, biennials, auctions, museums, kunsthalles etc.) come along with the globalization of the market, the rise of new scenes of art production and collection (Asia, Central and South America), the advent of a new generation of artists and an overwhelming change of the ways in which cultural contents are transmitted and reproduced at a global level through the web and the social networks.

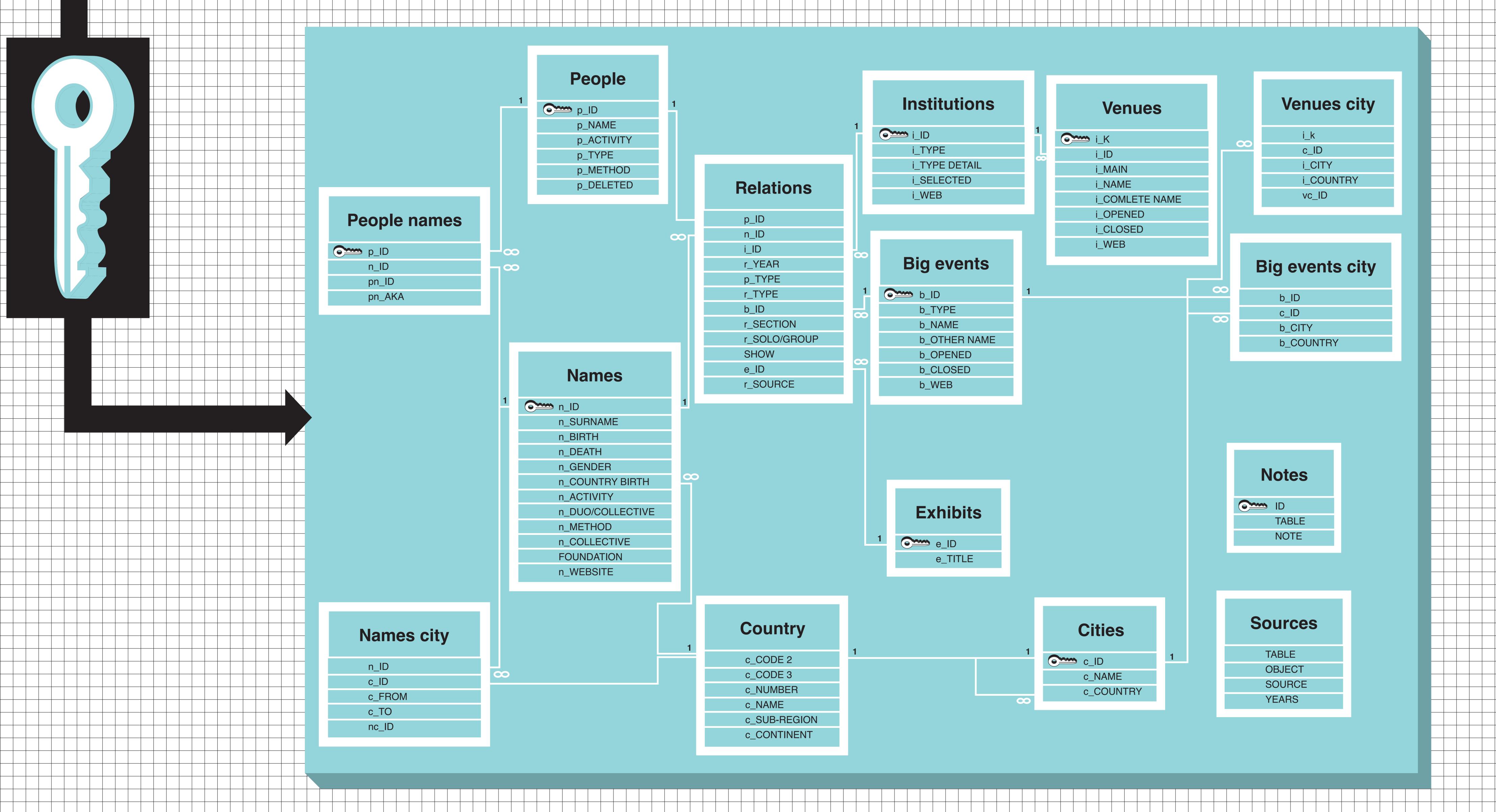
How the transformation occurs within the specific reality of the visual arts world? How and in which direction the globalization alters the structure of the art system and its relations with the markets? Which consequences affect the single national scenes and their mutual relations?

Adopting a geographical perspective, Art Basel can be used to observe how the globalization process impacts on the behaviour, the role and the reciprocal influences of the national platforms of dealers acting in this élite fair.

"National" strategies are not easy to detect - since they are not univocally declared, nor necessarily developed by political or public institutions: more often these movements – if existing at all – are driven by implicit intentions, shared and promoted by small groups of influential private dealers, working through networks of peers.

One of the objectives of the analysis, therefore, is to detect the ways in which the different countries organize the relationship between local galleries and local artists, and their evolution through the years.

These differences at the national level can be clarified by looking at mutual relations among countries.



The galaxy shows 77,420 relations between a constellation of 12,880 artists and 542 institutions.

The circles are the artists in the Art Basel modern and contemporary art fair from 2005 to 2013.

The stellar door through which artists gravitate towards the center is a dark matter. How is artists' legitimization created and granted over time?

Where does the light of the smaller and more peripheral stars come from?

In the nebula of the art system different layers appear. In the centre, the gravitational force of the system works to transform the stellar dust into stars. Are they the most shining ones?

The squares are the galleries in Art Basel from 2005 to 2013.

he diamonds are 33 international art museums and their exhibits from 2005 to 201

Italian artists, galleries and institutions are represented in black.

The galaxy shows a concentric image of the art system. Some artists and institutions lay in a more peripheral area, whereas some others occupy more central positions.