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Independent visual artists in Johannesburg and their expansion to the digital space, 2020-2024

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A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of *Doctor of Philosophy* in Art History at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa.

Supervisor: Professor Christo Doherty

March 2025

ABSTRACT

The art world has undergone significant transformations in recent years, largely driven by digital platforms such as social media. These have altered the dynamics of visibility, recognition, and success for visual artists. Traditionally, galleries have served as the primary gatekeepers, offering institutional validation and access to networks of collectors, curators, and critics. However, in the wake of technological advances and the COVID-19 pandemic, independent artists in Johannesburg have increasingly turned to digital platforms as an alternative to traditional gallery representation. This study explores how independent artists in Johannesburg have navigated this shifting landscape between 2020 and 2024, using digital tools to establish new forms of capital and gain visibility in a rapidly evolving field.

Research methods utilised include semi-structured in-person interviews to gather data from artists about their experience of the art world and use of digital technology. Interpreted with reference to Pierre Bourdieu's theories of habitus, field, and capital, the data shows how artists accumulate and exchange cultural, social, and economic capital, both in the digital space and within the traditional art field. It highlights the complex interplay between the various forms of capital, as well as the tensions and opportunities presented by the digital space. The study also explores the limitations of gallery representation, which, while still valuable, no longer exclusively determines the path to legitimacy and success for artists. Instead, artists are forging new pathways to achieve autonomy and sustainable careers.

This research aims to contribute to knowledge by developing a nuanced definition of the "independent artist" within Johannesburg's contemporary art scene, an underexplored category in South African art research. Examining how independent artists make use of digital platforms to negotiate their positions and establish viable practices, the study sheds light on the implications of these shifts in the Johannesburg art field. It extends Bourdieu's theoretical apparatus into the digital space by incorporating concepts such as digital social capital and digital habitus, providing a framework for understanding how artists navigate both physical and digital art fields in the twenty-first century. The study contributes to an evolving understanding of autonomy, visibility, and power in the art market, particularly in the context of crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Key words: Independent artists, digital space, Pierre Bourdieu, Covid-19 pandemic, social capital, Johannesburg art world, habitus, artists autonomy, social media

Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own unaided work. It is being submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the field of Digital Arts by thesis at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination at any other university.



14th day of March 2025 in Johannesburg

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG

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Dedication

For Jonathan, Thomas, and Catherine.
I could not have done this without your love, support and encouragement.
Thank you.

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I would like to extend my sincere thanks and appreciation to my supervisor, Professor Christo Doherty, for his help, support, and enthusiasm throughout the course of this thesis.

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Chapter 1: Introduction and context

1.1 Introduction

In recent years, the art world has undergone significant transformations, particularly with the rise of digital platforms and social media. Traditionally, galleries have played a central role in the art world, exerting significant influence over which artists gain visibility and recognition. As institutionalised platforms for support and commercialisation, galleries have been important connectors and intermediaries between artists and audiences and the primary gatekeepers of the symbolic positioning that artists occupy in the field. This dynamic was established as early as eighteenth-century Paris, where institutionalised structures of exhibition and recognition defined the careers of artists. From the nineteenth century, because of a growing interest in art acquisition among the middle classes and a consequently expanding art market, artists began to rely more on galleries for public representation.

In *Canvases and Careers: Institutional Change in the French Painting World* (1965), Harrison and Cynthia White examine how institutional structures, market forces and social relationships shape the careers of artists and the production of art within the French painting world. Through their analysis of the Paris Salon—established in 1667 by the Royal Academy and supported by the French monarchy, becoming the dominant institutional force in the European art world by the 19th century—White and White demonstrate how such institutions amassed power and prestige, shaping both the careers of artists and the nature of the work they produced. By examining the impact of social and institutional factors on the production of cultural goods, White and White's work helped lay the foundations for Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural production[1], especially the development of his theoretical concepts *habitus, field* and *capital*.

White and White (1965, 11) observed that artists who exhibited in the Paris Salon or at the Royal Academy enjoyed a higher social status because of the institutional validation they received. This validation not only reinforced societal perceptions of art but also played a critical role in the professionalisation of artistic practice. Similarly, institutional recognition in the form

[1] Bourdieu has drawn significantly on the work of White and White, particularly in his analysis of the transformation of academic institutions' influence on the field of art, as elaborated in his *Manet Lectures* (2017, 764). Their statistical and morphological analysis of the evolution of artistic production—tracing shifts in volume, the number of producers, and the proliferation of artworks—provides essential empirical grounding for Bourdieu's argument regarding the structural changes in the art world that enabled figures like Manet to emerge (2017, 347). While White and White's contribution is central to his account, Bourdieu also incorporated insights from a broader network of scholars in the sociology of art and culture to develop his theory of the field of cultural production.

of gallery representation functions as a form of symbolic capital in contemporary art. Just as in eighteenth-century Paris, gallery representation remains an essential resource for artists to advance their careers and acquire visibility and access to broader networks of collectors, curators, and critics.

However, as White and White (1965, 6) also point out, this process of institutional recognition has its limitations. Artists who were validated by these institutions – much like those affiliated with prestigious galleries in Johannesburg[2] – were often restricted in their output and subject to the tastes and commissions of their patrons. The Royal Academy, for example, had the ability to transform guild artisans into "artists" in the higher, more professional sense, but this came with constraints: artists were often restricted to producing large landscape paintings for the Salon or fulfilling commissions, which did not always guarantee a sustainable income. This situation mirrors the challenges faced by many artists in Johannesburg, where gallery representation is rare and often tied to specific institutional structures that prioritise established, commercialised practices. As will be shown in this study, many artists in Johannesburg struggle to secure long-term gallery representation, which limits their access to institutional and cultural capital.

White and White (1965, 79) highlight a significant shift in the art world during a period of profound social and technological change. Exclusion from the Salon had a profound impact on artists, often resulting in economic precarity and underscoring the extent to which the institution governed artistic success (Delacour & Bernard 2011, 440). A pivotal moment of transformation occurred in 1863 with the *Salon des Refusés*, when artists rejected by the official Salon defiantly exhibited their work independently, challenging the authority of the institution. This marked the beginning of a broader resistance to institutional ideologies—one that unfolded through a series of protests, a decisive break with the Salon in the form of the first Impressionist exhibition in 1874, and ultimately the emergence of a more sustainable alternative in the form of the "dealer-critic" system (Delacour & Bernard 2011, 441). In addition, the middle class became more interested in art, and technological advancements made art materials – such as tube paints and pre-stretched canvases – more accessible, artists were no longer confined to the traditional model of producing large, commissioned works for wealthy patrons. These changes allowed artists to produce more work independently and facilitated the dissemination of their art outside of traditional institutional frameworks. This shift in the

[2] Johannesburg and more specifically the "Johannesburg art field" refers to the cultural and professional ecosystem of artists, galleries, institutions, and audiences concentrated within the metropolitan boundaries of Johannesburg, South Africa. Geographically, this field spans key art hubs such as Rosebank, Braamfontein, and Maboneng, among others, where major commercial galleries, project spaces, studios, and art schools are located.

production and distribution of art further contributed to the growth of an art market where dealers, galleries, and other intermediaries became increasingly important. Artists were now able to generate a more regular income from their work, which was a significant departure from the precarious nature of earlier artistic careers that relied heavily on a system of patronage.

There are striking parallels to these historical shifts in the contemporary Johannesburg art scene. The commercial gallery system remains dominant, but independent artists, especially those who engage with digital platforms, are beginning to create more diverse pathways towards achieving income and recognition. Much like the Salon in nineteenth-century Paris, gallery representation today still carries significant cultural and economic value. However, contemporary artists are less dependent on this institutional authority, echoing the rebellious spirit of the *Salon des Refusés* artists.

There are striking parallels to these historical shifts in the contemporary Johannesburg art scene. The commercial gallery system remains dominant, but independent artists, especially those who engage with digital platforms, are beginning to create more diverse pathways towards achieving income and recognition. Gallery representation continues to hold cultural and economic value, as it did for artists in Paris during the nineteenth century, but artists today are not as reliant on these structures as they once were. The digital space has become an important avenue for Johannesburg-based artists, providing a platform for self-promotion, networking, and even sales, without the need for institutional validation. Artists can thus build new forms of capital – digital social capital, for instance – that operate alongside traditional forms of cultural capital associated with gallery representation.

Like the innovations in art production described by White and White, artists in Johannesburg have utilised technological advances such as the social media and other online platforms to expand their reach and establish a more independent mode of practice. This allows them to circumvent some of the restrictions imposed by the traditional gallery system and acquire more agency over how and where their work is displayed and sold. However, as the study demonstrates, the relationship between digital and traditional systems of capital in the Johannesburg art field is not entirely straightforward. Digital platforms offer the promise of greater autonomy and broader access but also introduce new complexities and power dynamics. For instance, while artists may be able to generate visibility and income independently, they still face the challenge of accumulating the cultural capital necessary to establish long-term credibility within the art world.

In a manner similar to what happened in nineteenth-century Paris, Johannesburg's art field is undergoing a transformation in response to both technological innovation and shifting social dynamics. The commercial gallery system, while still a key player in the art ecosystem, is no longer the sole gatekeeper of artistic legitimacy and financial success. Artists, particularly independent ones, are now navigating a hybrid landscape that blends the opportunities offered by digital platforms with the traditional sources of cultural capital. As in the past, this shift highlights the complex interplay among institutional power, artist agency, and the evolving nature of artistic production in a rapidly changing social and technological context.

1.2 Establishing context: Independent artists and the field of art in Johannesburg

The field of art in Johannesburg, as in many global cities, is shaped by a competitive gallery system that privileges commercially viable work and often upholds exclusivity as a marker of value. However, this system can be inaccessible to many artists, particularly those who are emerging, marginalised, or who choose to work outside of long-term institutional or gallery representation. For the purposes of this study, I use the term *independent artist* to describe those artists who sustain their practices through alternative platforms, self-organised initiatives and digital networks rather than through exclusive gallery affiliation. The reasons why artists operate independently are varied and complex, including structural barriers to access, the spatial and financial limitations of galleries, and a desire for greater creative and representational autonomy. While this initial definition offers a starting point, it will be further developed in the course of the thesis as I explore how independent artists navigate, contest, and reconfigure the boundaries of the contemporary Johannesburg art field.

One of the most significant spaces in which these dynamics are playing out is the digital sphere. In contrast to the physical gallery system, digital platforms offer independent artists alternative modes of visibility, circulation, and connection that are less constrained by traditional gatekeeping structures. The rapid growth of platforms such as Instagram and LinkedIn, along with online marketplaces like Artsy and Latitudes Online, has opened new avenues for artists to build audiences and sustain their practice. The rise of the digital space both dissolves and distils the significance of independent artists being based in Johannesburg. On the one hand, digital platforms dissolve geographical constraints by allowing artists to participate in a transnational art field without physically relocating or relying exclusively on Johannesburg's local networks. On the other hand, as will be explored in this research, the digital space distils the significance of a Johannesburg base by making it a symbolic resource within the global field,

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this shift, highlighting the necessity for art world participants to adapt to new modes of production, promotion, and distribution. Owing to the accessibility and transparency afforded by digital platforms, the global crisis catalysed a transformation in how art is produced, perceived, and received—particularly for those working outside of conventional institutions.

The main objective of this study is to understand how independent artists in Johannesburg have navigated the art world using digital platforms between 2020 and 2024, and how their practices may have influenced, or be influencing, the field of contemporary art. By focusing on this specific period, the research aims to capture the shifts in artistic strategies brought about by increased reliance on digital tools and virtual spaces, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. The study draws on Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical concepts of habitus, field, and capital to analyse the positions from which independent artists operate, how they perceive and negotiate the art field in Johannesburg, and the strategies they employ to acquire, expand, and exchange various forms of capital – both in the physical art world and in the digital space. Drawing on Bourdieu's concepts, the digital space is examined as a field of interconnected threads which each represents a form of capital that feeds into the broader field of art.

The study explores the complexities of artistic practice and the shift towards digital spaces; in the first instance, out of necessity because of restrictions consequent on the COVID-19 pandemic; but also, more broadly, as a response to the limitations of the dominant traditional gallery system. The research aims to provide insights into the role of digital platforms in democratising access to the field of art in Johannesburg, while not neglecting the potentially negative implications of artists' involvement in the digital space – which include algorithmic control, copyright and intellectual property issues, and over-saturation. It further seeks to identify the potential for independent artists to access new opportunities and build sustainable careers in an increasingly complex environment. The thesis will explore whether artists can begin to build new forms of capital to operate alongside, and at times independently from, the traditional forms of capital typically associated with gallery representation. The study aims to understand the implications of these developments for participants in Johannesburg and wider art world structures.

My interest in this research has been informed by my position as a director at David Krut Projects, a well-known and established gallery, workshop and project space in Johannesburg, as well as my position as a practising independent artist and curator. Through these networks, I have observed the strategies and priorities of artists seeking alternatives to traditional gallery representation and their impact on the art field. This has enabled me – in line with Bourdieu's

observations on reflexivity – to adopt a self-reflexive approach, critically examining my own position in the field of art as well as the history, experience and interactions that shape my perceptions of the field in Johannesburg. This study will contribute to debate about an ever-evolving field of art in Johannesburg, the expanding role of digital platforms in artistic production and distribution, and the socio-cultural implications of this for artists, in Johannesburg and elsewhere.

The research makes an original contribution by providing a nuanced definition of the "independent artist" within the context of Johannesburg's contemporary art scene, while also offering insights applicable to other fields of art and creative practice. The definition will not only enhance understanding of the independent artist's position within the art field but also serve as a basis for comparison with similar definitions in other creative industries, enabling a more expansive exploration of autonomy in the arts in general. It will also contribute to the development of a classification for "independent artists," a category that has yet to be established in research on visual artists, particularly in South Africa.

Mary Corrigall's 2019 report, *The South African Art Market: Pricing and Patterns*, offers a valuable classification scheme for artists based on their market status, ranging from lesser-known to internationally established. However, her categories such as self-taught, mid-career, late-career, and residency/biennale artists omit any reference to "independent artists." Given that Corrigall's classification is derived from data in 2018 primary market exhibitions and art fair price lists, and that the researchers compiling the report primarily consulted gallery professionals, this omission probably reflects a methodological limitation inherent in the study's scope. By focusing predominantly on artists represented by galleries or institutions, the report excludes artists who operate successfully outside the traditional models of gallery representation that dominate the Johannesburg art field.

This reliance on gallery-based perspectives and commercial data means that the report overlooks the statistics and lived realities of independent artists who may be building sustainable careers through alternative channels such as direct sales, online platforms, artist-run spaces, or community networks. In other words, independent artists remain largely invisible within this market-oriented classification, reinforcing the centrality of institutional validation in defining artistic success and legitimacy.

This situation points to the broader issue that market-driven research often fails to capture the full diversity of artistic practices and economies in South Africa. It foregrounds the need for alternative frameworks and methodologies that recognise and incorporate artists working

beyond the confines of traditional market structures. By developing a formal definition of independent artists and exploring their distinctive modes of practice, this study begins to challenge prevailing assumptions that equate market representation with artistic relevance and impact.

In addition, the study offers a detailed analysis of how independent artists have used the digital space to advance their careers. It investigates how independent artists accumulate different forms of capital (cultural, social and economic) through utilising the digital space and alternative networks outside of traditional gallery structures. It offers insights into how independent artists are negotiating their positions and navigating an ever-evolving, digitally-focused artworld, where digital tools offer new means for achieving visibility and engagement. By investigating the strategies and mechanisms independent artists use to establish and sustain their practices outside of traditional art institutions, this research highlights the transformative potential of the use of the digital space in the contemporary art field.

The research critically applies Bourdieu's theoretical concepts of habitus, field and capital to a particular period in South Africa art, focusing on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and its aftermath to 2024. The study thus shows how these concepts can be deployed to understand the shifting dynamics in a field of art during a period of crisis and change.

Finally, this study expands on Bourdieu's concepts to include and develop the notion of digital forms of capital, specifically digital social capital and its interactions with other forms of capital. It explores the notion of digital habitus, which is developed through interaction in the digital space. While Bourdieu's theories have been applied to digital practices more broadly, this research brings them to bear on the context of the contemporary art world. The expansion of Bourdieu's concepts to include digital forms of capital and habitus represents a significant contribution to understanding how contemporary artists navigate both physical and digital fields to establish a sustainable working artistic practice.

My interest in the topic of independent artists and dynamics within the art world has developed from my own involvement in the field of art in Johannesburg where, as mentioned earlier, I function as both a gallerist and independent artist. This interest was spurred on by observation of the surge in activity on social media during the COVID-19 pandemic by artists promoting their work and practices online. My conjecture is that artists are increasingly negotiating their position in the art world and seeking ways to become autonomous in their engagement with galleries and other institutional structures. While galleries continue to serve as gatekeepers to

opportunities, influence, and advancement, I believe that artists now have the opportunity to employ strategies to increase their autonomy and develop successful careers independently.

1.3 Research objectives

The purpose of this study is to understand how the use of digital technologies and social media in the twenty-first century has led to new possibilities beyond the gallery system for independent artists in Johannesburg.

The study's research objectives are aimed at ascertaining how a number of independent artists working outside of gallery representation have navigated the Johannesburg art field, and what mechanisms and strategies they have used to do so. The specific objectives of this study are:

1. To define the notion of "independent artists" in the contemporary field of art.

2. To map out the structure of the Johannesburg art field, highlighting the evolution of the field over a period of time to contextualise the dynamics of how capital has been distributed in the field.

3. To investigate why independent artists function independently beyond the traditional gallery system by examining the various subfields or alternative spaces where these artists operate and accumulate forms of capital, and how they do so.

4. To establish how independent artists use digital platforms and social media to engage with audiences and networks and acquire forms of capital.

5. To analyse the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the use of digital platforms in the field of art in Johannesburg.

1.4 Chapter outline

This study is presented in seven chapters. The second chapter provides a close reading of Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical framework that underpins the enquiry. Drawing on Bourdieu's key sociological concepts of habitus, field, and capital, this framework constitutes a foundation for examining how independent artists in Johannesburg deal with the evolving art field, with a particular focus on their engagement with digital spaces. The chapter introduces additional concepts and literature on the digital space, notably, the notions of digital habitus and digital social capital, which will be expanded on in Chapter Five and applied in Chapter Six.

Chapter Three outlines the research methodology, providing a rationale for the selected methods and sampling techniques. It explains how Bourdieu's theoretical concepts have informed the processes of data collection and analysis to meet the research objectives. This chapter includes a summary account of all the interviewed participants and their various roles – artists, art specialists and independent practitioners – to contextualise their contribution to the study.

Chapter Four presents a selective mapping of the field of art in Johannesburg, beginning with the historical context that has shaped and continues to shape the city's cultural landscape. It examines the various subfields that are essential to Johannesburg's cultural infrastructure and how, in terms of Bourdieu's theory of capital, they attribute value to art in Johannesburg. The chapter highlights major events such as the country's transition to democracy and the impact of the two Johannesburg Biennales that initiated changes in the broader field structure. It considers the dominant commercial gallery scene as well as the history of how independent and collaborative studio spaces were established and what they have to offer to independent artists. In sum, the chapter contextualises the field of art in Johannesburg and its subfields to delineate the structures in which independent artists operate.

Chapter Five begins by examining the growing influence of technology on art production, particularly through use of the digital space. With reference to Bourdieu's concept of field, it explores how capital is accumulated and negotiated within this digital space. Additionally, the chapter investigates how capital resources gained online may be transferred into more tangible forms of capital in the physical art world, a process that will be further explored in Chapter Six. The chapter also considers the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Johannesburg art scene, focusing on how the global crisis accelerated the adoption of digital platforms by artists and other participants in the art field. A case study of the development of the Latitudes Online Marketplace is included to illustrate these shifts.

Chapter Six addresses several of the key objectives of the research by analysing the data gathered from interviews with artists and practitioners in Johannesburg. It begins with a summary of Bourdieu's central theories and their application to the practices of independent artists. The chapter then clarifies the notion of "independent artists" in the visual arts, comparing the definition formulated with others from comparable creative industries. Building on insights from the previous chapter, it examines how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the practices and perceptions of independent artists. It draws on these to explore the artists' motivation to remain independent rather than being exclusively affiliated with a gallery, and assesses the relations typically obtaining among independent artists, galleries, artist-run spaces

and collective studios. Lastly, the chapter highlights how independent artists perceive engagement in the digital space and how they leverage digital platforms to their advantage. I provide some examples of specific strategies used by the artists Lebogang Mabusela and Banele Khoza.

I conclude the study by outlining the impact of the digital space on independent artistic practices, adverting to both the temporary and permanent shifts it has caused within the art world. The COVID-19 pandemic temporarily forced the art world to shift online exclusively, as artists and institutions adapted to lockdowns and social distancing measures. During this time, digital platforms became the primary means of engagement, allowing artists to maintain visibility, share work, and interact with audiences when physical interaction was impossible.

However, the pandemic also sparked a more permanent shift in the art world. Even as physical events and exhibitions resumed, the integration of digital components has persisted. Artists now engage in hybrid models that combine digital visibility with physical presence. The shift has permanently altered the way artists, galleries, and institutions operate, leading to new ways of connecting, distributing work, and generating income. The broader art world has had to adapt to this new dynamic, with both digital and physical engagement playing crucial roles in sustaining and expanding artistic practice and access.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

2.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the theoretical framework that underpins the investigation of independent artists and their situation in the Johannesburg art field, focusing on their strategies for exploring new possibilities beyond the traditional gallery system in the years 2020 to 2024. The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's (1930–2002) key sociological concepts of habitus, field, and capital, will inform this framework and guide the investigation. The chapter introduces and explains some central theoretical concepts and key terminology. Bourdieu's notion of field is extended to understand the dynamics of the digital space and the processes of acquiring and expanding various forms of capital in that space.

Applying Bourdieu's theoretical framework to the Johannesburg art world enables analysis of its underlying social structure. This has been shaped by the city's complex social and political history, including its mining origins[3] and the enduring impacts of segregation and apartheid. The city's contemporary cultural landscape embodies a diversity fostered by mass migration, yet its cultural and economic domains remain marked by racially inflected displacement, disparities and a lack of support and funding for cultural institutions (Murray 2011; Botma 2017, 214).

At the centre of this cultural infrastructure is the Johannesburg Art Gallery, which exemplifies the intersection of cultural production, power and racial dynamics. Johannesburg's transformation from a mining town to a growing metropolis was heavily influenced by private interests, particularly those of the British mining magnates and the wealthy white elite that controlled the city's economic and political landscapes.

Cultural development in Johannesburg during its early years is deeply intertwined with the political agendas of the city's racialised colonial history. At the time of its founding, the Zuid Afrikaanse Republiek (1886–1902) was reluctant to establish Johannesburg as a permanent city, which led to a lack of investment in public institutions like museums, libraries, and theatres

[3] Johannesburg was founded in 1886 as a tented mining camp after gold was discovered in the area. The recognition of the region as the world's largest gold reef led to the development of some of the biggest gold mines globally, attracting mining prospectors, companies, and workers (Vearey 2017, 1). From its inception, the city's design was based on racial segregation, reinforcing unjust systems that controlled and limited the movement of workers into and within Johannesburg (Vearey 2017, 1).

(Grundling 2015, 36). This hesitation by the colonial government left a significant gap in the cultural infrastructure that was ultimately filled by private citizens, many of whom were wealthy mine owners and industrialists. These influential figures, predominantly of European descent, shaped the early cultural landscape of Johannesburg along the lines of their own interests and agendas while sidelining the needs and contributions of the city's Black migrant population.

The Johannesburg Art Gallery (JAG), established during this period, is a key example of how colonial political agendas were embedded in the development of cultural institutions. Marketed as a beacon of high culture and European sophistication, JAG was also a symbol of British imperial dominance, especially after the South African War (1899–1902). Lord Alfred Milner, the British High Commissioner for the Transvaal and Free State, saw Johannesburg as a city in need of civilising in consonance with the wider British project of cultural imperialism. Milner's vision of Johannesburg's "refinement" was aimed at changing the city's negative image as a rough, chaotic mining hub by permeating it with symbols of European superiority and respectability (Grundling 2015, 37).

The founding of JAG was part of this broader effort to reshape Johannesburg's identity. The gallery was intended to enhance the city's cultural stature in the eyes of the British colonial elite and therefore reflected an exclusionary culture that prioritised European tastes and experiences. As such, the gallery's collections and exhibitions were primarily European in focus, leaving little room for the rich cultural traditions of indigenous African communities. The absence of African representation in the gallery at the time speaks to the racialised and hierarchical nature of the city's cultural development. African art, culture, and heritage were marginalised or rendered invisible in the public sphere, and institutions like JAG became emblematic of the power structures that reinforced racial divisions in the city.

JAG's positioning within the cultural and political landscape of Johannesburg highlights the ways in which it was used to further entrench colonial ideologies. The representation of culture in Johannesburg during the early twentieth century was not just about art; it was about the control of cultural narratives, and by extension, the control of racial and social identities. The gallery's founding must therefore be understood not only as an effort to enhance the city's prestige but also as part of the imperialist attempt to assert British authority and marginalise indigenous African contributions to the cultural and intellectual life of the city.

In this context, the development of the Johannesburg Art Gallery reveals the extent to which cultural institutions during colonial times served as vehicles for racial and political agendas,

perpetuating the dominance of European settlers while systematically effacing the cultural expression of other local communities. This racialised approach to cultural development extended beyond the realm of art galleries and into educational practices, where access to quality education was often reserved for the middle class and above. Migrant workers and lower-income communities were either unable to afford education or were systematically excluded.

Arts education, when it eventually emerged, was shaped and dominated by protagonists of European origin. European art teachers established provisional educational venues for African students, initially through mission schools, and later through workshops and more dedicated art schools such as the Polly Street Art Centre (established in 1952) and the Rorke's Drift Art and Craft Centre (established in 1962). The curriculum developed by these institutions sought to transfer European Modernist concepts into the South African context, often relegating indigenous practice to the status of craft or lesser art forms. Nevertheless, institutions like Polly Street and Rorke's Drift played a significant role in the development of an authentic Black South African Modernist art (Klein 2014, 1353). Artists such as Sydney Kumalo, Lucky Sibiya, Lucas Sithole and others became prominent figures in this movement.

The artistic aspirations of such students were inevitably at odds with the overarching policies of the Bantu Education Act, introduced in 1953 (Klein 2014, 1347). The Act sought to control the educational opportunities and cultural development of Black South Africans, further entrenching the racial divide in access to cultural resources. The majority of Black artists consequently created under enormously difficult circumstances and compromising conditions, with limited outlets for their work. Many artists were detained or imprisoned, while some – including Dumile Feni and Ernest Cole – went into exile abroad to study or work. The educational system that emerged alongside institutions like the Johannesburg Art Gallery thus reinforced the racial hierarchies that defined South African society, while also transmitting European cultural norms.

During the apartheid years (1948–1994), educational inequalities meant that aspiring Black artists had limited or no entry into the mainstream fine art sector (Marschall 2001, 51). The lack of access to prestigious educational institutions prevented many from accumulating the necessary cultural capital to attract the attention of galleries or curators who could help advance their careers. Economic disparities compounded these challenges, limiting access to essential resources such as art materials, studio space, and financial support, which in turn affected artists' ability to produce and promote their work.

Bourdieu's theory of field production helps to explain how artists and communities in Johannesburg have responded to the limitations imposed by established structures within the field of art. Alternative spaces such as Bag Factory, August House, and Ellis House, among others, have emerged as crucial subfields within the Johannesburg art field. These spaces provide essential support systems, resources, and opportunities for artists to display and distribute their work. They assist artists to bypass the barriers created by economic and institutional inequalities that have obstructed them from accessing dominant art institutions and thus accumulating social and cultural capital within the field.

In addition to these subfields, the Johannesburg art world comprises a range of spaces that contribute to artist development. These include traditional institutions such as the Johannesburg Art Gallery, which operates within an essentially public and politically engaged sphere; corporate galleries and university museums; and, perhaps most relevant to this study, commercial galleries. Each of these segments functions according to a particular logic and is embedded within distinct power structures that shape its institutional priorities, audiences, and modes of cultural validation.

Traditional public institutions, such as the Johannesburg Art Gallery, are often shaped by state or municipal agendas and operate within frameworks of public accessibility, civic engagement, and national heritage. While intended to serve a broader and more diverse audience, JAG, situated in a now undesirable and dangerous area in the inner city, has faced resource constraints resulting in severe decay of its infrastructure, damage to the collection, institutional inertia, and the pressures of transformation in a post-apartheid context (Haffajee 2024). The gallery's legitimacy stems from a long-standing institutional history, but its actual influence and value in its current state is very limited.

Corporate galleries and university museums operate under more bureaucratic or educational logics. While these spaces can provide valuable visibility and legitimacy, access is often limited to well-established artists, to those who possess forms of academic capital and/or are embedded in specific professional networks. Of relevance to this research is the role and accessibility of commercial galleries, which continue to dominate the Johannesburg art field. These galleries remain largely white-owned and are concentrated in the city's affluent northern suburbs, reinforcing existing racial and class-based inequalities in the distribution of cultural capital (Malala, 2019).

Bourdieu's concept of the field is particularly useful in explaining the persistence of these structures. The Johannesburg art field is not a neutral space but one shaped by historical and ongoing power relations that govern who gains visibility, critical recognition, and economic reward. Race, class, geography and institutional affiliation intersect to shape access to cultural legitimacy. While alternative spaces and digital platforms have begun to challenge traditional hierarchies, the field remains deeply conditioned by the legacy of apartheid spatial planning, the cultural tastes of elite white audiences, and the economic imperatives of the commercial art world.

Nevertheless, ongoing initiatives within the field seek to address historical inequalities. Many galleries and museums have begun promoting Black artists, responding to their historical exclusion from the cultural field. Bourdieu's field theory suggests that the emphasis of galleries and museums on Black artists represents an effort to challenge and reshape the established order by recalibrating its implicit power structures. Johannesburg's art scene, historically determined by colonialism and apartheid, has long been racially charged, with Black artists marginalised and excluded from cultural production and recognition. The shift adumbrated here can be seen as a strategic attempt by these institutions to realign the field and address past inequities in order to remain relevant in a changing socio-political landscape. The challenge to existing cultural hierarchies means that the dominance of white artists, particularly male artists, is being subverted.

Expanding Bourdieu's notion of the field into the digital space reveals another alternative for artists to engage in the art world in a way that is, to some extent, outside of the complexities of the social-political landscape of Johannesburg. The digital realm provides a more democratic setting, enabling artists to navigate without the constraints of reference to Johannesburg's historical cultural landscape. The digital space acts as a new field, offering artists new opportunities for visibility, engagement, and the accumulation of cultural capital, independent of the traditional, entrenched power dynamics that have long defined Johannesburg's art world.

2.2 Introducing Bourdieu's theory of habitus, field and capital

Pierre Bourdieu is regarded as one of the foremost sociologists and cultural anthropologists of the twentieth century, having made significant contributions to our understanding of social and cultural production. His academic trajectory culminated in the position of Professor at the Collège de France, a prestigious higher education and research establishment in Paris (Grenfell 2008, 1). Bourdieu's influential theoretical framework known as the "theory of practice" has

been widely applied in various academic disciplines, including education, art and cultural studies, bringing sociology into prominence within French intellectual discourse. In his early works *Les Héritiers* (1964), *La Reproduction* (1970) and *Homo Academicus* (1984), Bourdieu critiqued the view of education in post-war France (Grenfell and Hardy 2007, 1). In these writings Bourdieu adopted a social-anthropological stance towards the French education system, employing a range of statistics and ethnographic data to reveal its underlying structures. From his work on education, Bourdieu developed a particular interest in cultural structures, leading to his most notable works: *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1979), *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* (1993b) and *Outline of Theory of Practice* (1977). In the latter work, Bourdieu introduced three key conceptual and theoretical tools – habitus, field, and capital – which he used to analyse the ways in which social structures and individuals interact to shape social and cultural practices (Bourdieu, 1979).

These concepts have since been applied in a wide range of disciplines and contexts to understand resources and dispositions in society. In *Conversations with Bourdieu: The Johannesburg Moment*, Michael Burawoy and Karl van Holt applied Bourdieu's concepts to the South African context, exploring their relevance within the country's social and political landscape (2012). They discuss, for example, the importance of habitus in the history and future of class mobilisation. Ann Roberts has conducted a study, "Factors Driving the Demand for Contemporary Art amongst Individual Buyers in South Africa" (2020), drawing on Bourdieu's theories of cultural capital and field analysis to investigate the functioning of the field of contemporary art and its power structures. She argues that given the deeply racialised nature of South African society, it is crucial to use the concept of habitus to understand how collectors' practices are shaped not only by their personal dispositions but also by the socio-political history of the country, especially in the case of formerly marginalised Black collectors. Roberts (2020, 28) further introduces the concept of cleft-habitus, which gives a name to conflict between an individual's habitus and the rules or positions within a particular field.

Bourdieu's notion of *cleft habitus* refers to a deep, often lasting internal split within an individual's dispositions, values and ways of engaging with the world. This occurs when a person's social trajectory produces a conflict between their origin — the social class and cultural conditions they grew up in — and their later position, often linked to education, profession, or cultural capital (Bourdieu 2007, 100). This split can be especially pronounced when someone comes from lowly social circumstances but achieves high academic consecration or acquires substantial cultural capital (for example, through elite education or recognition by cultural institutions). In such cases, the embodied attitudes, behaviours, and expectations

formed through early socialisation no longer seamlessly align with the demands of a new or contrasting field, producing a sense of dislocation or ambivalence (Bourdieu 2000, 160).

In the case of independent artists in Johannesburg, a cleft habitus may manifest when artists raised in economically marginalised environments — where art was not considered a viable career path and access to resources was limited — go on to receive tertiary education, participate in international residencies, and engage with global art discourses. This trajectory can create an internal tension in which artists are fluent in the codes of the global art world — such as conceptual discourse, grant writing, and exhibiting in biennales — while simultaneously carrying the embodied memories, speech patterns and social perspectives of their communities of origin. These may be at odds with the values or aesthetic priorities of elite institutions. Such tensions are further compounded by the structural realities of the Johannesburg art field, which, although small, is heavily influenced by the commercial gallery system and global market expectations. Artists may feel pressured to produce work that performs well in this context to secure market value, while also feeling a responsibility to remain socially relevant and locally engaged. This can foster ambivalence: artists may critique the elitism and exclusivity of the field, yet continue to depend on it for recognition, income and legitimacy.

This tension can create discomfort or alienation, prompting the individual to either exit the field or adapt and expand their habitus through the acquisition of new knowledge, social networks, or capitals required by the field. Roberts (2020, 53) uses the notion of symbolic violence alongside habitus to explore how exclusionary practices in the South African art market have reinforced or altered dominant taste-making structures and concentrated power within certain sectors of the field. These concepts are central to her investigation of contemporary collection practices with a view to deconstructing and rebuilding a more inclusive and equitable art world in South Africa.

When one situates the experiences of independent artists in Johannesburg alongside Roberts's framework, one notices similarities in how these artists navigate a field dominated by commercial galleries and practices. There are also traces of symbolic violence embedded in the systems of commercial galleries and other subfields like art fairs that reinforce dominant cultural and institutional power. Independent artists, who come from diverse racial, generational, and career-stage backgrounds, often find themselves excluded from these established spaces.

This study differs by not only examining the habitus of participants but also exploring how they use the digital space to augment their habitus and expand the art field. The digital space has thus become a mechanism by which independent artists deal with exclusionary practices and the broader structural constraints of the art world.

Other South African research has explored the impact of the contemporary gallery system on the construction of an artist's cultural capital. In her study "Mikhael Subotzky and the Goodman Gallery: Constructions of Cultural Capital "(2016), Megan Kidd argues that various aspects of Subotzky's career, including his educational background and affiliation with the influential Goodman Gallery, have contributed to the construction of his cultural capital. She examines different forms of cultural capital – embodied, objectified, and institutional – to conduct her analysis. Outside of the South Africa context, these concepts have been used to understand the way in which the field of contemporary art is experienced by exhibition goers and how habitus and cultural capital shape these experiences (Newman et al. 2013). However, there is limited research on the application of these concepts to specific groups of artists, such as independent artists in Johannesburg, a gap that this research aims to address.

In the following section, each of Bourdieu's triad of concepts will be explained and applied to the situation of independent artists in Johannesburg.

2.3 Bourdieu's theory of habitus

Bourdieu's theory of habitus offers a framework for understanding the interplay between social structures and individuals within a particular context or field. It is also a way of characterising our social mode or habitual relation with our everyday world (Bourdieu 2000, 141; Vakalopoulos 2022, 256). The context in which habitus is established includes both our immediate and mediated experiences (of objects, persons, groups, places, situations, values, etc.) (Vakalopoulos 2022, 257). Bourdieu formally defines habitus as "both a system of schemata of production of practices and a system of perception and appreciation of practices" (1990b, 131). Here Bourdieu suggests that habitus is a form of socialised subjectivity, which includes internalised mental frameworks that guide actions and behaviours. He suggests that patterns of behaviour are mediated through objective structures and practices, such as our family, education and broader cultural influences (Grenfell and Hardy 2007, 29). The concept of habitus centres on the learned and internalised dispositions of individuals, which shape their perceptions and behaviour within a specific context. These dispositions, acquired through socialisation, guide actions and decisions, often perpetuating themselves by being reactivated in

similarly structured practices over time. Analysis of the habitus can also reveal the characteristics of a field. For example, Grenfell and Hardy examine the habitus of American Abstract Expressionists by drawing on data regarding age, geographical origins, family status, education, friends, supporters and patrons, and the galleries with which they were associated. They also examine the visual characteristics of the artists' paintings, together with the artists' own claims and critics' commentaries about their paintings and the influences on them. In this way Grenfell and Hardy were able to identify patterns reflecting the structure of the artistic field.

2.3.1 Philosophical and sociological frameworks of habitus

The concept of habitus resonates with various philosophers and sociologists who have explored themes of acquired dispositions and social structures. While Bourdieu's formulation of habitus is distinctive for its emphasis on social practice, his ideas share common ground with earlier thinkers such as Aristotle and Aquinas, or more recently, Husserl, Weber, and Durkheim, who have contributed to the broader understanding of human behaviour and socialisation (Grenfell and Hardy 2003, 28).

Aristotle's notion of *hexis* refers to a stable, acquired quality or disposition that is neither innate nor contrary to nature but rather the result of habituation. *Hexis* serves as a pattern or organising principle, providing coherence, stability, and direction to one's reactions and propensities (DeLapp 2024, 176). Thus, *hexis* is viewed as fixed and unchanging, arising from stable aspects of character so deeply internalised as to be automatic and essential to an individual's being. According to Aristotle, this state of character is a form of complete habituation, where virtuous actions are no longer consciously deliberated but performed naturally and effortlessly (DeLapp 2024, 175). Similarly, Bourdieu's habitus comprises acquired dispositions shaped by life experience such as education and upbringing, working to determine an individual's outlook and behaviour over time. Both Aristotle and Bourdieu see these dispositions as crucially responsible for an individual's actions, with Bourdieu extending the idea to emphasise that habitus is not just personal but also shaped by broader social structures. By comparing Bourdieu's notion of habitus with *hexis,* historical readings of the habitus concept have concluded that its impact on the past and present is fixed. However, recent scholars have challenged this by offering new interpretations that allow for habitus to shift, its creation being a process that evolves over time and is influenced by experiences in different social settings. For example, Flisbäck (2014) argues that habitus is not static but continues to develop throughout a

person's lifetime, changing with shifts in their circumstances and the environments with which they engage.

Phenomenologist Edmund Husserl used the term *habitualität* (habituality) to refer to the environmental "pre-given" in a phenomenological apprehension of life-world experience (Grenfell and Hardy 2003, 28). *Habitualität* pertains to how individuals experience the world through pre-conscious habits of perception and action that shape their understanding and engagement with reality. Husserl distinguishes between habitus and *gewohnheit* (habit), viewing habitus as an overarching disposition that can be expanded or diminished depending on the articulation of an individual's interests. Habitus in this context represents the guiding disposition that shapes one's behavioural responses in relation to specific possibilities, informed by a self-reflective awareness (Magri 2020, 644). While Bourdieu shares a similar view of the habitual nature of human action, he emphasises that habits are not merely individual but socially conditioned and deeply embedded within the structures of society.

Crucially, Bourdieu presents habitus as a dynamic and generative system of dispositions—shaped by past experiences yet continuously adapting to present conditions and future possibilities. Rather than being fixed or rigid, habitus is responsive to changing contexts, enabling individuals to navigate and renegotiate their positions within the social field (Bourdieu 1990a, 53; Grenfell 2008, 51). This flexibility has been supported by other theorists who similarly emphasise the contingent and processual nature of habitus. Sulkin (1982, 109–110), for instance, argues that habitus is continually formed and reformed through the daily practices of individuals. While it constitutes a structured system of meanings, it does not operate according to a mechanistic or deterministic logic; individuals do not merely reproduce inherited meaning systems, they actively produce, engage with, and transform them. This view reinforces Bourdieu's characterisation of habitus as a generative structure, capable of producing contextually appropriate practices through the interplay of embodied dispositions and the demands of the social field. The adaptability of habitus thus enables what Bourdieu describes as the "correctness" of practices within contexts (1990a, 54), a quality that emerges from the alignment between an individual's historically situated dispositions and the structural parameters of the field (Jenkins 1998, 79). In this way, habitus functions not only as a principle for the generation of practices but also as a framework for interpreting and valuing those practices (Harker 1984, 108; Bourdieu 1990b, 131). It is thus capable of reinforcing or transforming the social structures from which it arises, both structured by past conditions and structuring present and future action.

Bourdieu further clarifies the nature of habitus as:

> the system of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organise practices and presentations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to maintain them. Objectively regulated and regular without being in any way the product of obedience to rules, they can be collectively orchestrated. (1993b, 5)

Here, Bourdieu emphasises that habitus results from enduring, continuous patterns of thinking, behaviours and practices ingrained over time. In the case of independent artists in Johannesburg, their dispositions may be shaped by the (history of the) city's racially divided and culturally complex environment. Artists are also influenced by the dynamics of Johannesburg's art field, where patterns of production, display, and distribution are set mainly by commercial galleries and private institutions, as museums and publicly funded institutions are either absent or have collapsed.[4] While independent artists still engage with the existing system, their pathways are shaped by collaborating broadly, self-organising exhibitions, and using social media to present their work.

As a form of "socialised subjectivity," habitus consists of socially acquired dispositions, practices, beliefs, habits, and tastes that individuals develop through their experiences within a specific social field (Grenfell 2008, 51). Key markers of habitus include age, geographical and social origins, artistic education, social, cultural, or political background, and commercial connections (Grenfell and Hardy 2003, 30). Habitus captures the particulars of an individual's history and how this history manifests in the present, influencing how and why they make decisions and act in certain ways. For example, artists who have not been exposed to institutional environments like galleries, or who have had negative experiences with them, may be more inclined to pursue alternative methods such as focusing on online practices.
While habitus may seem stable, it is fluid and evolving. Past choices can create new possibilities, and an artist's interactions with their environment, different fields and participants can shift their current context, reshaping their position and understanding of the

[4] These institutional changes and dynamics will be discussed further in Chapter 4, which offers a selective mapping of the Johannesburg art scene.

world (Grenfell 2008, 52). Bourdieu's concept of habitus is valuable for investigating how independent artists in Johannesburg both reflect and reproduce the social and cultural structures they operate within, while adapting to the constraints and opportunities that these offer. In relation to artists' interactions with the digital space, Bourdieu's concept can be extended to include a *digital habitus*—a framework that encompasses how artists' engagements, digital practices and participation in virtual communities both shape and are shaped by their online interactions. According to Porubčinová (2017, 86), the notion of digital habitus refers to a "mechanism of cultural and social reproduction created through the subjectivisation of objective rules, and a source of their objective expression in the sphere of activity." These mechanisms of reproduction are not consciously directed toward specific outcomes but are instead shaped by the broader structures within which artists operate, contributing to the ongoing evolution of their social field.

Bourdieu's theory suggests that social actions – whether the implementation of plans or the acting out of roles – are products of the interaction between an individual's habitus (shaped by their upbringing and socialisation) and the resources (in Bourdieu's terms, the capital) that they bring to a particular field. Given that individuals possess unequal amounts of capital, competition for positions within any field is inevitable (Bourdieu 1977, 19). In this sense, habitus is a system of durable and adaptable dispositions that, by integrating past experiences, serves as a framework for present perceptions, actions, and decisions (Bourdieu 1993b, 7182-83). These dispositions tend to perpetuate themselves, influencing behaviour in the future by recurring in similarly structured practices (Ikin et al. 2021, 179). Such practices are shaped not only by the individual's dispositions but also by the constraints, demands, and opportunities made available by the social field in which they operate (Jenkins 1998, 78). Bourdieu (2017, 344) in fact suggests that artists, in particular, function within a particular context where their behaviour is adapted either to struggle against or move in accordance with that context.

The concept of habitus therefore extends beyond mere behaviours to encompass an individual's ways of thinking, acting, feeling, and being, influenced by their history while remaining adaptable to current and future conditions. This helps explain why individuals act in particular ways rather than others (Maton in Grenfell 2008, 52). Habitus allows for both experiential and sociological understandings of social engagement. Experientially, individuals may perceive themselves as acting independently, but in reality, their decisions are shaped by how they perceive the behaviours and attitudes of others. Sociologically, behaviours and social practices are governed by implicit rather than explicit regularities within a social group. Bourdieu seeks to understand these implicit behaviours through the concept of habitus (Bourdieu 1994, 65). It

is a concept that presents a challenge for researchers as it is difficult to observe and measure the internalised dispositions that drive behaviour (Reay 2004; Davey 2009). This is why direct engagement with artists is necessary to achieve an understanding of their positions and experiences.

Bourdieu's concept of habitus provides a useful framework for understanding the practices and decision-making processes of independent artists in the Johannesburg art field. These practices are shaped by their personal histories, experiences, and socialisation within Johannesburg's cultural, economic, and political context. Their internalised dispositions influence how they approach their art, navigate the art field, and interact with other artists, galleries, curators, and institutions. Moreover, their habitus is shaped by their access to various forms of culture that can affect their success within the field. For example, artists from privileged backgrounds often have a habitus that aligns more closely with the dominant culture. This enables them the more easily to acquire cultural capital such as specialised knowledge, artistic skills and cultural references that are highly valued and can lead to greater recognition and success in the art world. Such acquisition in turn provides them with advantages, such as access to financial resources and social networks. The latter presents opportunities for introduction to influential galleries, collectors or curators, which increase their chances of success.

In Johannesburg's highly competitive art scene, independent artists may encounter both opportunities and constraints that challenge or reinforce their habitus. For example, an artist with more economic capital may be able to afford better materials or access prestigious galleries, while another may rely on community-driven initiatives or alternative exhibition spaces. The competition for recognition and success in the field reflects the unequal distribution of capital among artists, and their habitus will shape how they adapt their practices to these conditions. The persistence of the influence of past experience such as educational background or training, social networks, and exposure to certain cultural values, will continue to inform how they operate.

2.3.2 Critiques and adaptations of Bourdieu's habitus in the field of art in Johannesburg

Bourdieu's concept of habitus has been subjected to critique, particularly in respect of its perceived determinism and its capacity to account for social change. Critics such as Sullivan (2002, 149–152) argue that habitus offers an overly rigid and empirically vague account of human behaviour. She maintains that Bourdieu does not clearly define habitus and that the concept envisions individuals passively accepting their social destiny without room for agency,

reflection or transformative action. This criticism is echoed in Burawoy and Van Holt's (2012) assertion that habitus lacks the theoretical precision to analyse significant social shifts, noting its unverifiable nature and limited explanatory power in understanding disruption or transformation within a social order.

However, these critiques, while important to consider, can be problematised on several grounds. First, they often rest on a misinterpretation or partial reading of Bourdieu's work, particularly those that conflate habitus with mechanical determinism. As Harker (1984, 118–120) argues, habitus is in fact reconstituted with each generation and shaped by both the dispositions of socialising agents and the changing material and symbolic conditions of the environment. In contexts of significant transformation—such as technological innovation or political disruption—new generations are exposed to different structural conditions, leading to the emergence of new dispositions. Thus, habitus is no more static than the social practices it underpins; it is historically contingent, relational, and responsive to change. Harker's position reframes habitus as a dialectical structure—durable but adaptable—enabling both the reproduction of social norms and the potential for rupture and innovation.

Yet, as Ivemark and Ambrose (2023, 946) caution, the very durability of habitus can produce a form of passivity. Its deep-rooted dispositions may limit the individual's capacity to fully adjust to social environments that differ radically from those in which it was formed. Bourdieu (1990a, 64) recognises this tension, noting that habitus gradually adapts by adjusting itself to a probable future. Taken together, these perspectives suggest that habitus operates within a spectrum: it is flexible and historically responsive, yet its foundational dispositions can slow adaptation to rapidly shifting or unfamiliar social fields.

Grenfell and Hardy (2003, 29) affirm that while habitus may reflect inherited structures, it also plays a crucial role in shaping how individuals access social capital and navigate power within specific fields. In their view, habitus operates in tandem with institutional forces—such as curators, funding bodies, and gatekeepers—who themselves are embedded in shifting cultural logics and networks. Therefore, the field and habitus co-evolve, reflecting both continuity and change.

My own engagement with artists in Johannesburg builds on this more nuanced reading of habitus. The insights gathered through qualitative interviews reveal how artists actively strategise, reflect and adapt in response to the constraints and affordances of their social environment. Far from simply reproducing existing structures, many consciously seek to

disrupt or work around dominant institutions, for example, by leveraging digital tools to gain visibility outside of traditional gallery systems. This empirical focus brings to light the flexibility of habitus as it plays out in real-life negotiations, particularly in a rapidly changing context such as the post-pandemic art world in Johannesburg.

In response to Burawoy and Van Holt's (2012) concerns about the limitations of habitus in accounting for social change, it is also important to consider Bourdieu's broader conceptual framework. Concepts such as symbolic capital and the logic of the field provide more dynamic analytical avenues for understanding transformation, resistance and agency. When applied to the field of art, these concepts help explain how artists accumulate and convert symbolic capital (e.g., recognition, reputation, legitimacy) to shift their positions within a field that is itself undergoing change, such as through the rise of digital platforms, shifts in curatorial practice, or broader sociopolitical developments.

In the digital age, the habitus of Johannesburg's independent artists has evolved to include digital literacy and an entrepreneurial approach to self-promotion. Instead of simply reproducing traditional practices, these artists are strategically utilising digital tools to extend their reach and redefine their position within the global art landscape. Platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and specialised online galleries allow them to produce, display, and distribute their work, engaging with local and international audiences alike. This shift is not merely reactive to external limitations but an active response to the evolving nature of the art world. In this context, the negotiation of symbolic capital – through online presence, follower engagement, and virtual exhibitions – becomes as important as securing traditional gallery representation.

The expansion into digital space further challenges the notion of a fixed habitus, as artists adapt and innovate in response to the changing landscape of the art field. The rise of digital space opens up new possibilities for the acquisition of symbolic power, offering artists the freedom to engage with the art world on their own terms. In doing so, they reshape the structures of the field and redefine their place within it, carving out opportunities for agency, transformation, and visibility that were once difficult to access within the traditional gatekeeping institutions,

However, the promise of digital access is complicated by the realities of unequal access to digital resources—more formally referred to as the digital divide. The digital divide refers not only to the gap between individuals who have access to various forms of Information and Communication Technology (ICT)—such as computers, the internet, and other online communication tools—and those who do not (Mphahlele et al., 2021). It also indicates

disparities in digital skills, levels of participation, and attitudes toward digital engagement (Porubčinová, 2020:5). The divide is not only evident between countries at different levels of development, but also within a single country, among individuals and communities with varying degrees of financial means, educational attainment, social capital and geographic accessibility. In South Africa, socio-economic factors play a significant role in shaping access to digital resources. For example, Chetty et al. (2018:2) observe that families from low- to middle-income backgrounds often have limited access to digital technologies—including computers, the internet, and ICT infrastructure—for largely economic reasons. Camerini et al. (2018:2491) argue that individuals from lower socio-economic groups not only struggle with access to such technologies, but also frequently lack the digital literacy needed to use them effectively.

For artists affected by these structural barriers, the symbolic and economic opportunities offered by the digital art world often remain inaccessible. This reproduces existing inequalities within the field, creating a parallel exclusionary system in which access to digital tools and platforms becomes a new form of capital. Although digital platforms may appear to democratise access to the art world, they often replicate offline hierarchies, privileging those who already possess the economic, educational and infrastructural advantages needed to participate effectively

Therefore, while the digital turn holds significant potential for reimagining artistic careers and expanding access to audiences and markets, it must also be critically examined for the ways in which it reinforces social and economic divisions. The limitations imposed by the digital divide suggest an important area for further research, particularly in understanding how unequal access to technology, digital literacy and connectivity continues to shape who can meaningfully participate in and benefit from the digital art economy.

2.4 The notion of field

Characterising the Johannesburg art world as a contested social space can be illuminated by Bourdieu's concept of field. Bourdieu argued that to understand interactions between people or explain any social phenomenon, it is necessary to examine the social space in which interactions, transactions, and events occur (Bourdieu 2005, 148). In *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977) and *The Field of Cultural Production* (1993b), Bourdieu defines field as "structured spaces of positions whose properties depend on their position within these spaces and which can be analysed independently of the characteristics of their occupants … a state of the power relations among the agents or institutions" (1993b, 72). According to this view,

structural forces define the power relations between field participants and institutions, with positions varying in power based on their relative position within the broader art field. Fields are therefore networks of positions in relationships of mutual influence and determination (Vakalopoulos 2022, 29).

A field implies the mapping of social and institutional networks or a set of relationships which may be intellectual, cultural or educational. According to Bourdieu (Grenfell, 68), a social space or field is a boundaried area which consists of positions occupied by social agents (people or institutions). Within these boundaries there are limits to what can be done, as determined by the conditions of the field and the positions occupied within it (Grenfell 2008, 69). Bourdieu (1983, 312) states that the artistic field is a:

> Field of forces, but it is also a field of struggles tending to transform or conserve this field of forces. The network of objective relations between positions [within the field] subtends and orients the strategies that the occupants of the different positions implement in their struggles to defend or improve their positions.

While this definition helps clarify the mechanisms of power that operate within a field, it has the potential to overlook the individuals or groups who may negotiate or transform the field's structure through alternative practices, as is the case with independent artists in Johannesburg. It is important therefore to examine both the structural properties of the field and the practices of individual participants to gain a comprehensive understanding of its internal power relations.

Bourdieu suggests that fields operate as semi-autonomous spaces with their own defining logic and that social agents use different strategies to improve their position in a field through the accumulation of capital (Grenfell 2008, 69). A field is comprised not only of positions in the field but also of the values, discourses, traditions and particular modes of capital accrued. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992, 108) suggest that in order to construct the field, one must identify specific forms of capital that operate within it, and to achieve that requires an understanding of the logic of the field.

The defining logic of a field gives meaning to a particular social reality within which there is a constant struggle for legitimation, power and dominance (Grenfell & Hardy 2007, 49). The defining logic of the field of art in Johannesburg is shaped by the city's social and political history, particularly the effects of segregation and apartheid and the subsequent transition to democracy (Pretorius 2007, 19; Vearey 2017, 1). Soudien (2010, 352) suggests that the arrival of democracy produced new conditions for the distribution of power in the country, such as

multi-culturalism and new relations of privilege and subordination, which manifest in a range of social sites and institutions. The Johannesburg art field is further driven by the lack of government support for the arts and the economic needs of artists and galleries, which induce them to self-support their activities and further commercialise the art field.

2.4.1 The interplay between habitus and field

Bourdieu argues that habitus and field form parts of a whole and that the way in which a particular social reality is constructed is a result of the interplay between the two (in Grenfell and Hardy 2007, 30). This interplay occurs, first, in the cognitive construction of reality (habitus) by those the totality of whose actions make up the field; and secondly, in a structured world of sense and meaning, which presents itself to that cognitive construction, and which is already representing the "immanent logic," indeed necessity, of that field (Vakalopoulos 2022, 29).

Bourdieu (1979, 468) perceives a close match between social structure, the way individuals are organised, and ways of thinking. He argues that social structures are dynamic and complex and that ways of thinking are reducible to a basic division between positions occupied in the social order:

> All agents in a given social formation share a set of perceptual schemes and are organised into pairs of antagonistic adjectives used to classify and qualify persons in varied areas of practice. The network of oppositions between high and low, spiritual and material, free and forced, unique and common, brilliant and dull and so forth is the matrix of all commonplaces which find such ready acceptance because behind them lies a whole social order. (Bourdieu 1984, 468)

In the Johannesburg context, participants in the art field such as artists, galleries, institutions and collectors all have particular ways of seeing, interpreting and evaluating art based on their positions in the art world as well as their individual experiences and cultural influences. These often antagonistic positions include independent artists and artists who are represented by galleries, subtending a contrast between how their respective practices are viewed. For instance, there may be an impression that artists who are represented by galleries occupy more valuable positions in the art world, whereas independent artists who promote themselves on social media and sell their work through such platforms may be considered to make less serious

work. The artistic freedom of independent artists versus the perceived constraints on artists who are signed with galleries constitutes another such opposition.

The positions occupied by the groups of participants in the art world are situated in a particular social order, or logic of the field, and reflect the broader power dynamics that determine access, funding and opportunity. These pairs of positions and their attributes are tied to the distribution of power, access and control over forms of capital in the field of art. Any cultural field occupies a dominated position within the field of power because, despite the ambiguity of their relationship to those who occupy dominant positions, ultimately cultural producers are dependent on their patrons, be they wealthy art buyers or fine art institutions (Grenfell and Hardy 2003, 25).

When something like the opening up of the digital space causes changes in the field – such as a change in buyers, or access to buyers, curators and institutions – the power dynamics have the potential to change. The pairs of oppositions can therefore be fluid and dynamic as participants negotiate their positions in the art field. For example, in the context of Johannesburg's racialised history, artists navigate the internalised, racialised norms within the art world. The cultural and political practices under apartheid that excluded Black artists from mainstream formal art education and visibility and representation in galleries and institutions, shaped not only the physical spaces but also the practices within Johannesburg's contemporary art field. These historical conditions have left a lasting impact on the habitus of Black artists, influencing how they navigate the art world. Although not unique to or universally characteristic of Black artists in South Africa, there are instances where such artists express a reluctance to conform to the conventions of traditional gallery structures, instead opting to pursue independent trajectories or to establish alternative spaces for artistic production and engagement. This autonomy allows them to maintain control over their own resources and avoid dependency on galleries for opportunities or success. Galleries are often European in origin and may serve as a reminder of the oppressive systems to which Black artists were subjected during apartheid. In contrast, as galleries strive to become more supportive and representative of Black artists, young white, particularly male, artists may experience a need to maintain their independence, as they belong to a historically privileged group that it has become increasingly unfashionable to support.

2.4.2 Method for conducting a field analysis

Bourdieu (1992, 108) identifies three necessary steps in analysing a field and how its positions, practices and power dynamics function in relation to each other:

a) Analysing the position of the field in relation to the field of power.
b) Mapping out the objective structure of the relations occupied by agents or institutions who complete for authority of which the field is a site.
c) Analysing the habitus of field participants, the systems of dispositions they have acquired.

First, when analysing the field of art in relation to the broader field of power, it is important to consider the racial, political, historical, physical and economic structures that extend beyond the art field itself. The field of power in this context includes institutions and individuals in positions of authority that, however indirectly, influence gallery and individual art practices. Commercial galleries in Johannesburg play a key role as tastemakers, exerting influence over what is considered valuable in the art world. The authority embedded in the field of power determines what art is exhibited, affecting the careers of artists and reinforcing some narratives and practices at the expense of others.

Secondly, as fields are dynamic and have the potential to evolve, mapping out the structure of relations between field participants and the positions they occupy is an important component of analysing the field. Traditionally, for artists to gain access to collectors, they need to be represented by a gallery. But in the Johannesburg art field, artists are now able to accumulate networks in alternative ways, including artist-run spaces, individual participation in art fairs and engagement with the digital space. This shift speaks to the fluidity of the power dynamics in the field and how it affects the field structure. For example, the relationship between artists and art fairs traditionally depended on galleries, which were selected to participate based on the artists they represented and the collectors in their networks. More recently, the art fair Latitudes Online has allowed independent artists to participate in their shows without the need to exhibit through a gallery. This has shifted access points for artists and reflects the redistribution of power between artists and galleries.

The third step involves analysing the habitus of field participants to better understand why and how they approach their positions and engage with the art field. For instance, artists who studied abroad may not have the same institutional network as those who studied in Johannesburg, where institutional ties are often local and interconnected with gallery practices. These artists may be less well known in the Johannesburg art world and are likely to find it challenging to access gallery opportunities. As a result, they might focus on building their network through other means, such as the social media or by taking studio space in collective environments.

By considering the Johannesburg art world as a social field and examining its related subfields, I aim to identify the structure of power relations. I argue that the field is characterised not only by the negotiation of positions in the field based on existing structures but also by the potential for social transformation, particularly with regard to the impact of independent artists and their use of digital spaces. Bourdieu's concept of field provides an analytical framework for understanding how independent artists, gallerists, critics, curators, and other practitioners negotiate their positions and social spaces. It also helps to explain how they organise their resources and various forms of capital to gain advantage and legitimacy within the art world. The following diagram illustrates the ways in which independent artists access various subfields within the field of art in Johannesburg. It organises the various subfields into isolated and overlapping arenas, highlighting the agendas that drive artistic practices and career strategies. These subfields are classified according to their focus on symbolic, commercial, academic or cultural agendas. The diagram (Figure 2.1, below) provides a visual representation of all the relevant domains that artists need to access, independently or through collaboration. It illustrates the complex nature of the field of art in Johannesburg, especially for artists operating outside of traditional gallery structures**.**

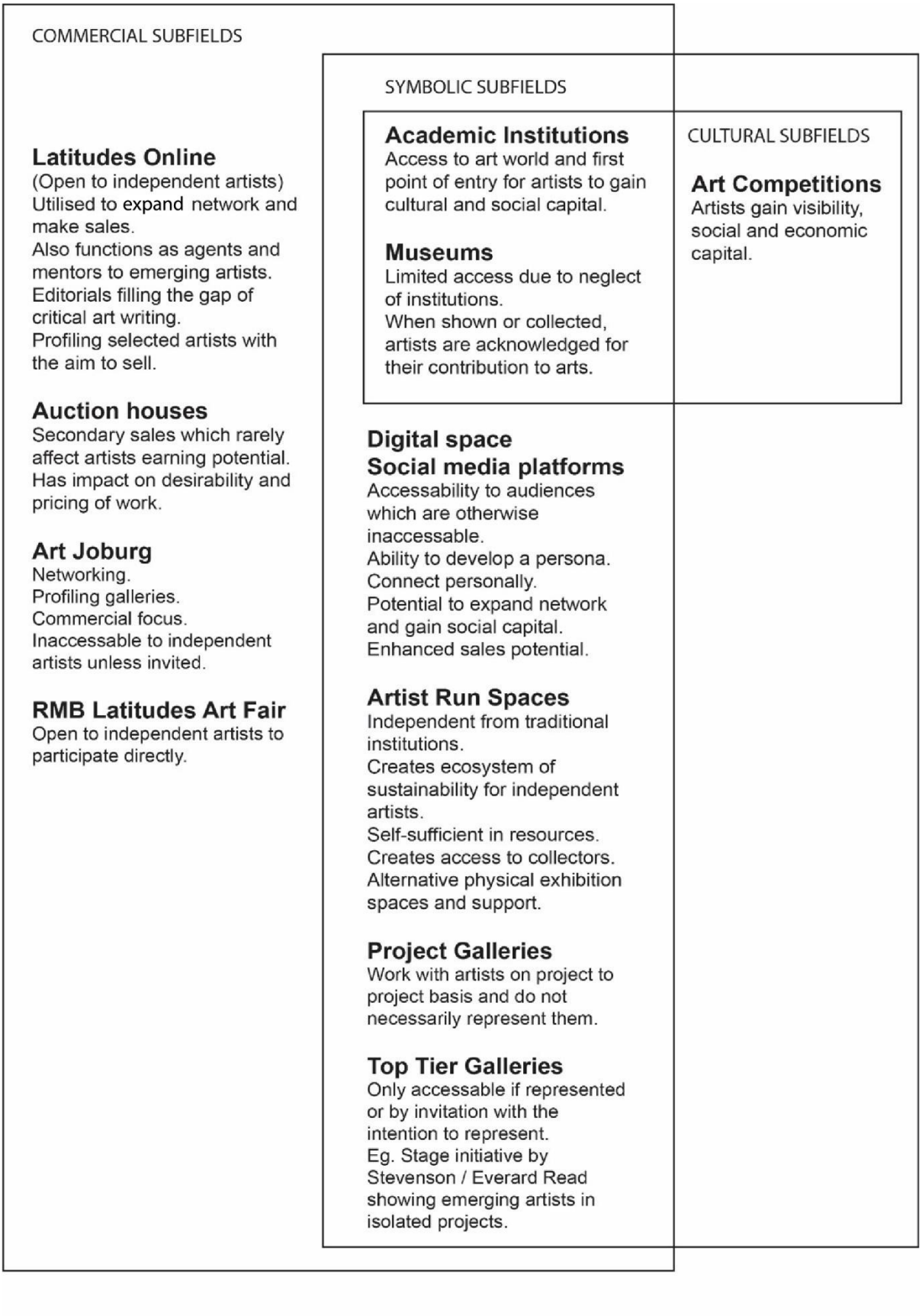


Figure 2.1: The structure of the field of art in Johannesburg.

2.5 Bourdieu's theory of capitals: Economic, symbolic, cultural and social

Bourdieu's theory of capitals is central to an understanding of how independent artists operate and gain recognition in the field of art in Johannesburg. For Bourdieu, capital is the mechanism through which the processes in a field operate (Grenfell and Hardy 2007, 30). It acts as a form of currency that assists individuals in navigating culture and has the potential to alter experiences and opportunities within a particular field (Blackburn 2023). While the concept of capital is associated by Marxism with material assets and resources in a capitalist economy, Bourdieu imagines a broader system in which assets of different kinds are transformed and exchanged across networks and social fields (Grenfell 2008, 102). For Bourdieu, capital works through processes of acknowledgement and recognition. Capital can only have value if it is recognised as such, especially though reproduction of its symbolic logic in particular fields (Grenfell and Hardy 2007, 30). Capital is characteristically a scarce commodity whose main function is to act as an arbitrator for social definition. Possessing capital is only useful because some possess more than others, although everyone recognises the value of capital (Grenfell and Hardy 2007, 31).

Bourdieu's forms of capital fall into four categories: economic, symbolic, cultural and social capital. For independent artists, the accumulation of a combination of these forms of capital is essential for gaining recognition and achieving success. The following sections will define and contextualise these forms of capital. The notion of capital will be expanded to include digital social capital, to denote the accumulation of resources in the digital space.

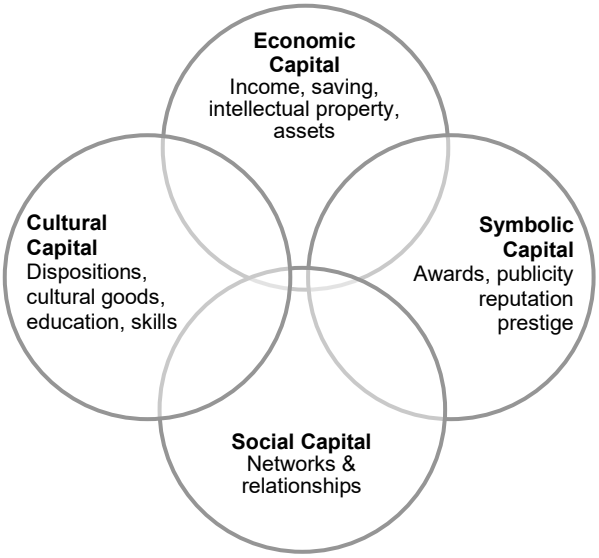


Figure 2.2. Forms of capital

2.5.1 Economic capital

Economic capital is the most material and tangible form of capital as it includes financial wealth – material assets, income, and the ownership of land and material resources by individuals and/or institutions (Grenfell and Hardy 2007, 30). Rather than positioning economic capital as dominant in his theoretical framework, Bourdieu gives equal weighting to each form of capital. While economic capital is what drives the field of power, it is only one component of what drives the field of cultural production (Flynn 2016, 59). In the Johannesburg art world, economic capital plays a significant role in shaping the dynamics of the field. There are certain social groupings where cultural capital, especially educational capital, is predominant, which means that institutions like museums could serve as consecrated sites where artists are able to function with economic capital largely neutralised (Grenfell and Hardy 2007, 68). In Johannesburg, however, the number of public art institutions and museums capable of providing opportunities to artists is limited, and therefore artists and galleries rely heavily on economic capital to fund the production and exhibition of work. This reliance on financial resources becomes even more critical in a context where alternative venues and independent exhibitions play a significant role in an artist's career. I will elaborate on the state of public art institutions and museums in Chapter 4, where I map out the dynamics of the Johannesburg art scene.

Bourdieu (1993b, 68) argues that economic capital provides the guarantees that can be the basis for self-assurance, audacity and indifference to profit – dispositions which alongside the possession of considerable social capital and recognition in the field point towards the outposts,

the most exposed positions and riskiest investments which are often the most profitable symbolically. For independent artists who may not have the financial backing of a gallery or institution, having economic capital may enable them to secure studio space, purchase materials, start their own galleries, host their own exhibitions, participate in art fairs independently or network outside the boundaries of Johannesburg by attending international events. These activities increase artists' visibility and extend their networks, initiating the transformation of their economic capital into symbolic capital.

A concrete example is the emergence of galleries like BKhz Gallery or No End Contemporary, both artist-run galleries that position themselves at the periphery of the commercial gallery scene. Although the potential for profit may be remote at first, the symbolic value of these spaces is significant. BKhz gallery, in particular, has gained substantial recognition in the Johannesburg art world through its accumulation of symbolic and cultural capital, securing a valuable position in the field of art.

2.5.2 Symbolic capital

Symbolic capital is a key component of Bourdieu's sociological framework, which – as we have seen – emphasises the role of power structures and hierarchies in shaping society. Symbolic capital is constructed from the resources that individuals or groups possess due to their social status, prestige, or recognition. These resources are not necessarily material or economic but acquire value through the recognition of others. Bourdieu insists that the value of any form of capital depends, in part, on social recognition. As an asset, symbolic capital is arbitrary and instrumental, determining social and cultural advantage or disadvantage (Thompson 2010, 104). Bourdieu maintains that through the process of transformation, the fields of symbolic capital mirror the structure of the economic field. Each field of symbolic capital replicates the system of unequal relationships found in the economic field and reinforces the core structure of social inequality.

Bourdieu argues that an individual's perception of their position within a specific field is shaped by the symbolic capital they hold, which is understood through both their own cognition of their position and the recognition they receive from others. Symbolic capital thus contributes to one's status and legitimacy in a given field. It also influences decisions and judgments within that field, such as choosing which gallery to exhibit with or which artist to represent. Symbolic capital is thus a dynamic and interactive concept, constantly shaped by an individual's position and actions within a field (Bourdieu 2006, 60). Symbolic capital encompasses various subtypes, including cultural, social, artistic, and scientific capital (Thompson 2010, 103). These forms of

symbolic capital share the characteristics of being objectified or embodied and acquired gradually over time. Symbolic capital is gained through a systematic process of inculcation, adding value to a social agent in proportion to how well their personal habitus aligns with that of the field of inculcation. Symbolic capital also varies in its ability to be transferred across different fields, which in turn influences its relative value within each field (Thompson 2010, 115). The following section delves deeper into the dynamics of two specific subtypes: cultural and social capital.

2.5.3 Cultural capital

Cultural capital refers to symbolically valued cultural 'goods' and attitudes, which can materialise in tangible items such as books, paintings or clothes; or in intangible but esteemed qualities such as qualifications, taste, cultural preferences and language (Grenfell and Hardy 2007, 30). This type of capital, whether expressed materially, physically or through gestures, holds symbolic significance because it harvests recognition from those who share similar positions within a given field. Cultural capital can be embodied, objective or institutionalised.

Embodied cultural capital refers to knowledge and education, encompassing various abilities and skills acquired through ongoing socialisation processes (Scheffer 2020, 16). These acquired capabilities are not purchasable or inherited but are dependent upon class-based opportunities relating to education patterns, access to cultural incentives or social connections. Scheffer (2020, 16) argues that this perpetuation of social class underscores the emphasis on embodied capital through ongoing internalisation of the available education offerings and resources. Unequal access to education can be interpreted as producing a guarded advantage for the elite, who consequently establish the norms that legitimate cultural standards.

Objective cultural capital includes material cultural goods such as books, paintings and instruments, which can be passed on as assets. These assets only hold value as a form of capital if other agents also recognise the significance of the goods and possess corresponding embodied capital (Scheffer 2020, 16).

Institutionalised cultural capital pertains to titles such as academic degrees, professional certifications, artistic awards and institutional affiliations that certify an individual as in possession of certain cultural skills and abilities. Because these titles are formally acknowledged by institutions, they are more readily converted into economic capital, such as when completing an education programme is seen as proof of suitability for entering the professional world

(Scheffer 2020, 17). Michael Grenfell and Cheryl Hardy's (2007) analysis of the field of contemporary British Art significantly illustrates the structural connections among artists, critics, teachers, curators and institutions of art. Grenfell and Hardy look at how institutional links are expressed at the level of individual or personal connectivity (2007, 123). They refer to artists such as Michael Craig-Martin,[5] who evinces a strong pattern of capital through his associations with hallowed institutions of art. Craig-Martin's education at Yale, where he was taught by well-known artists such as Frank Stella, provided him with sufficient institutional cultural capital. His own success as an artist adds to his artistic capital and his position as a Professor of Art at Goldsmiths gives him institutional consecration and bestows on him the power to further offer institutional consecration to others (2007, 123).

When artists accumulate cultural capital from areas such as educational background, they are more easily situated within institutionalised practices and may desire to be represented by a gallery or become visible to galleries and other traditional spaces. Independent artists, on the other hand, may rely more heavily on social capital gained through the digital space to build and expand their networks to access cultural and artistic capital. This is especially likely in instances where they have not been able to acquire cultural capital through art school or interest from a gallery, collector or museum. Institutional cultural capital is a key driving force in the art world. Certain educational qualifications or affiliations with specific institutions are ranked in a hierarchy of importance and significantly influence the amount of cultural capital possessed by an artist. For example, studying fine art at a historically prestigious institution such as the Wits School of Art – an institution that has produced numerous successful artists, including Karel Nel, Cecil Skotness, and Jane Alexander, who have gone on to establish influential professional networks in the city – carries greater cultural value or capital than being self-taught. Similarly, an artist who has their first exhibition at a prominent gallery like the Goodman Gallery may be perceived as having more institutional cultural capital than an artist who holds their first show independently. This hierarchy of cultural capital affects how artists are recognised, supported, and integrated into the art world.

[5] Michael Craig-Martin, a conceptual artist and painter born in Ireland, grew up in the United States after his family relocated there in 1946. In the 1960s, he completed a BA and MFA at Yale University School of Art and Architecture, where he studied with Jennifer Bartlett, Brice Marden, and Richard Serra, drawing inspiration from the works of Josef Albers and the emergence of Minimalism and Pop Art. Craig-Martin became a prominent educator at Goldsmiths College in London and served as a Tate Trustee from 1989 to 1999. He received a CBE in 2000, was elected to the Royal Academy in 2006, and was knighted in 2016 during the Queen's Birthday Honours for his contributions to art (Michael Craig-Martin, n.d., https://www.michaelcraigmartin.co.uk/about/).

However, as Botma (2017, 214) notes, the distribution of cultural capital in South Africa has historically favoured the preservation of apartheid and colonial structures. Forms of cultural capital such as knowledge, 'taste,' and access to cultural institutions have primarily been available to a privileged group, while marginalised communities, particularly Black South Africans, have had limited access to these resources. This unequal distribution of cultural capital continues to shape the dynamics of the visual arts in Johannesburg, with significant barriers to entry for many artists from historically disadvantaged backgrounds. Botma also suggests that, unless there is a fundamental transformation in the structure of the art field and the nature of cultural capital itself, the legacies of apartheid and colonialism will persist in shaping cultural dynamics. This points to the need for strategic interventions, such as government policies supporting Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment[6] and the African Renaissance,[7] to reshape the distribution of cultural capital and make it more accessible to historically disadvantaged groups. In the post-apartheid period, such efforts have sought to democratise cultural spaces and transform the allocation of cultural capital. One strategy is intentionally to circumvent traditional gallery structures, which have long acted as gatekeepers of cultural capital.

Using the example of Mikhael Subotzky, Megan Kidd has explored the role of the contemporary gallery system in the construction of the cultural capital of artists in Johannesburg (Kidd 2016). While Kidd's research clearly demonstrates how the gallery system in Johannesburg can build an artist's cultural capital, it overlooks the necessary and complex interplay among capital, field and habitus proposed by Bourdieu. For instance, Kidd does not take into consideration the concept of habitus, which is critical in understanding how Subotzky's position in the art world may have been promoted by his social circumstances, upbringing and familial ties. A more comprehensive approach would consider not only the mechanisms of capital accumulation but also the socio-political forces that influence an artist's trajectory within the art world. In this instance, social capital appears to have played a significant role in the artist's recognition and success within the art world.

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[6] In 2003, the Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (B-BBEE) Strategy was published as a precursor to the B-BBEE Act, No. 53 of 2003. The fundamental objective of the Act is to advance economic transformation and enhance the economic participation of black people in the South African economy (South Africa. Department of Trade, Industry and Competition 2019).

[7] The concept of the African Renaissance includes the implementation of a critical cultural strategy that challenges the right of Europeans to impose their cultural and spiritual values on indigenous African communities in the wake of centuries of colonial oppression. The African Renaissance calls for a revalidation of indigenous knowledge systems, belief structures, artistic practices and so forth (Nadubere 2001).

2.5.4 Social capital

The concept of social capital was originally developed by Bourdieu and American sociologist James Coleman (1998), both of whom defined it in terms of networks of personal relations that individuals or small groups accumulate over time. These networks can be familial, religious or cultural in nature (Portes 2000, 2). Social capital, in this sense, refers to the symbolic or practical value of advantage based on whom an individual knows (Lin 2002).
Bourdieu and Coleman, alongside other early founders of social capital theory, Portes (1998), Burt (2000), and Lin (2002), suggest that social capital is fungible with other forms of capital, such as economic and cultural, that require some form of 'investment.' Social capital has been defined in various ways. Adler and Kwon (2002) focus on the relationships inherent in networks by defining social capital as the goodwill created through social relations that can be mobilised to attain needed resources. Gedajlovic et al. (2013) suggest that actual resources such as information, assistance or money are what constitute social capital. Lin (2002, 19) defines social capital as an investment in social relations by individuals through which they gain access to embedded resources to enhance expected returns of instrumental or expressive actions. These different viewpoints ultimately embrace three key aspects: the development of relationships, the gaining of access to resources, and the use of these resources to achieve desired outcomes (Smith et al. 2017, 20). Bourdieu argues that people intentionally build relationships for the benefits they should bring later (cited in Dika and Singh 2002, 32).

Bourdieu's conceptualisation is particularly valuable insofar as it centres on structural limitations and unequal opportunities for accessing institutional resources caused by factors such as class, gender and race (Dika and Singh 2002, 34). "Institutional resources" are in this context the cumulative actual or potential resources linked to a durable network of institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition (Dika and Singh 2002, 33). Bourdieu (1986) argues that the existence of a network of connections is not a given but rather the product of ongoing efforts to produce and reproduce lasting, useful relationships capable of securing material or symbolic profits. A network is the product of investment strategies, individual or collective, which are consciously or unconsciously aimed at establishing or reproducing social relationships. In this regard, Portes (2002, 2) argues that social capital can rarely be acquired without investing material resources and cultural knowledge, both of which are essential for establishing and maintaining relationships.

For artists, developing social capital is an essential component in building and sustaining a successful career, especially in the case of independent artists who work outside of traditional

gallery structures and institutions. Social capital provides access to networks which enable artists to navigate a competitive and often opaque art scene. Flynn (2015, 61) argues that social capital contributes to a number of aspects in artists' careers such as mentorship, gaining advice, establishing support networks and opportunities like exhibitions and residencies. An artist who has established strong relationships with fellow artists, gallerists, curators or lecturers in art institutions may have a better chance of being part of valuable collaborations, of being selected for exhibitions or of having their work featured in prominent galleries.

A significant channel for acquiring symbolic capital is through the reputation of the educational institutions that an artist attends. According to Bunar and Ambrose (2016, 37), educational institutions can function as structuring forces that assign value to an artist's career. In Johannesburg, an artist who has studied at the University of Witwatersrand may carry with them a certain level of prestige and credibility because of the institution's symbolic capital, accumulated through its network of academics and prestigious alumni. Besides educational background, artists can acquire social capital through their inclusion in exhibitions (especially when showing alongside more established artists), art fairs, participation in collective studio spaces such as The Bag Factory or August House and, more significantly, through the use of the digital space. An artist who has gained a large following on social media, and who has been able to produce work of a quality that resonates with galleries, curators or collectors, may find that their following can translate into real-world opportunities such as studio visits, invitations for exhibitions or successful attendance at exhibitions. Social capital can also enhance the effectiveness of a person's habitus in the field (Grenfell and Hardy 2007, 160). Through significant social networks, artists are able to gain valuable insights into processes and procedures within the field of art, for example, how to conduct their relationships with galleries or what to expect in terms of contractual agreements. These experiences shape an artist's habitus and affect how they perceive and navigate the artworld.

An artist's access to social capital can be enhanced through the use of digital platforms. Online engagement to enhance visibility and influence in the art world continues to grow in importance (Kwon 2018, 72). As social capital encompasses collective resources associated with attachment to a particular group, it can expand significantly through the internet and the connections that individuals establish online (Bourdieu 2011; Julien 2015). Julien (2015, 365) highlights how social interactions enable individuals to make expressions of social capital that specifically affect and extend their relationships. This shift has prompted scholars to reconceptualise traditional models of public participation and artistic legitimacy. Mandarano et al. (2010, 125) and Julien (2015, 365) argue that digital technologies are not merely augmenting conventional

forms of engagement but are instead giving rise to a distinct form of "digital social capital." This form is marked by the ability to gain status and influence through digital presence, follower engagement, and algorithmic visibility, rather than solely through institutional affiliations or physical-world gatekeeping.

Engagement in the digital space prompts a reconsideration of the implications of acquiring social capital. Traditionally, some artists have enjoyed more status, influence and success than others because of the nature of the symbolic capital that they have been able to accumulate through institutional networks. But the type of social capital that artists acquire in the digital space operates differently. Networks are accessible to all users of the platforms concerned, with the value of a user's network being largely determined by follower interaction, online visibility and platform fluency, rather by entrenched physical institutional relationships. However, this openness is not without its own barriers. As Ragnedda and Ruiu (2020, 2) note, digital capital is multidimensional—it includes not only access to hardware and connectivity but also internalised competencies, digital literacies and the attitudes necessary to engage productively online. Thus, while digital platforms democratise access to social capital in theory, in practice they still reward those with the skills, resources, and infrastructures to effectively mobilise their digital presence.

Bourdieu's concept of social capital presents a useful point of departure in examining the use and impact of the digital space for independent artists. By leveraging digital platforms, artists aim to construct autonomous frameworks that mirror established gallery norms and practices in order successfully to position themselves in the art world. They thereby aim to cultivate and promote their artistic abilities, expand their networks, diversify their audience, enhance global visibility, and create independent commercial and non-commercial opportunities. Bourdieu's theory of capitals must be enlarged to include the accumulation and exchange of capital in the digital space as it relates to art world practices.

2.6 The digital space and the relevance of Bourdieu's concepts

In recent years, digital technologies have become increasingly significant as instruments of participation and expansion in the arts and other industries (Mihelj et al. 2019, 1465). Digital technologies in this context encompass electronic tools, systems, devices, and resources that generate, store, process, and transmit data in digital form, including the internet, web and social media platforms. One of the key benefits of digital technologies is their capacity to reach larger and more diverse audiences in the digital space (Mihelj et al. 2019, 1466). The digital space

refers to the virtual environments created by digital technologies where individuals interact, communicate, and create content. Despite the widespread popularity of internet-related research, little attention has been paid to how independent visual artists use the digital space, particularly in terms of how Bourdieu's notion of capital is accumulated and translated into valuable social connections and opportunities in the physical art world.

Mandarano et al. (2010, 125) suggest that the digital age is a period in which digital technologies serve as the backbone of communication in broad social structures, extending their influence to various industries, including the art world. The digital age emerged from advances in communication and information technology in the 1970s that facilitated the production and distribution of information, eventually culminating in the World Wide Web in 1995. This advance in technology facilitated the development of new organisational structures and the formation of new networks and communities (Mandarano et al. 2010, 125). As mobile computing devices and wireless internet access have become more accessible, there has been a corresponding rise in individuals' expectations and desire for rapid and seamless information transmission and access (Mandarano et al. 2010, 123). A more complete account of this historical evolution of the digital space will be presented in Chapter 4.

Incorporating digital technologies into art world practices has fundamentally transformed the way in which artists and other agents in the artworld interact, and disseminate and consume information (Lee & Lee 2019, 1126). The internet has contributed to what can be called a revolution in the field of art, providing increased transparency to a world that is deliberately and notoriously opaque and secretive (Velthuis 2014, 97). This increased transparency has resulted in a growing online market for contemporary art, where artworks can be bought and connections can be made among artists, dealers and collectors without any physical contact between the parties involved (Velthuis 2014, 97). The use of the internet by galleries is not a new phenomenon, as many websites were founded during the "dot.com boom" era in the 1990s (Adam 2014, 121). According to Velthuis (2014, 97), establishing the online market in the digital space was difficult. Some of the earliest participants in this expansion to the digital space included Artnet (2000) and Sotheby's (2003), who had to close down their first sites or reconsider their role as information providers when the venture into online auctions failed because of a lack of collector interest (Velthuis 2014, 97). The experience of engaging with early online art and gallery websites during this time was often vitiated by technical limitations and difficulties, as the graphic user interface was still relatively underdeveloped (Jin & Lee 2019, 1126). The majority of these early sites have since disappeared, arguably because the engagement with artworks traditionally required "proximity and physical tactile interactions

between consumers and artworks" (Velthuis and Curioni 2015, 18), and potential buyers needed time to adjust. This may be the reason for the slower expansion of the art world online compared to other product markets, like those for books, fashion and electronics (Jin & Lee 2019, 1126).

Nevertheless, galleries started utilising the internet in the early 2000s, which became important for marketing art and which provided new opportunities to sell to unknown customers without having to engage in time-consuming and costly customer relations management (Williamson 1999; Grieg 2000, 11; Veldhuis 2014, 97). The online display of art works previously functioned solely to present documented works that were simultaneously being displayed in a physical gallery space. According to Velthuis (2014, 98) online transactions of this type would mainly focus on higher priced works of art made by artists with established reputations. The artistic and economic value of these works were to some extent established and buyers, having a frame of reference, would not hesitate to spend large amounts on artworks they had never seen in person (Velthuis 2014, 98).

With further advances in technology, the development and use of online platforms for user-generated content, termed social media, enabled the connection of more individuals in the art world with peers and patrons globally (Kartik and Mishra 2022, 512). According to Christian Fuchs, the term 'social' was coined for four primary reasons: excess of information, interactive communication between two or more users, the formation of strong, close-knit communities and generating content through collaborations (cited in Kartik and Mishra 2022, 512). The concept of social capital accumulation through digital spaces and social media has been explored in recent literature, but there have been debates about how it can be measured and exactly how it can be attained online (Julien 2015). The digital space is considered a crucial social field in the context of Bourdieu's theoretical framework (Xie et al. 2021, 3), as it reproduces relevant social structures that are instrumental in the accumulation of social capital by its users (Qi et al. 2018, 27). Online interactions both reflect and enhance participants' social capital, thereby spurring the growth of their networks (Julien 2015). Marisalo and Makkonen, (2022, 234) use the terms *e-capital* and digital capital interchangeably to refer to capital that emerges from capital-related possibilities enabled by the capability and willingness of individuals to utilise digital technologies and assets to pursue their individual goals. More relevant to this research is the notion of digital social capital or online social capital as defined by Faucher (2024, 21): the circulation of virtual (intangible) goods in terms of an exchange in which one or both parties may gain an advantage. This adaptation allows for an exploration of

how digital social capital is accumulated by independent artists and how digital social capital can be exchanged for other forms of capital in the physical art world.

Building on Bourdieu's concept of field, Julien (2015, 362) suggests that individuals who engage online have established specific parameters, rules, and structures that include some people while excluding others, thus shaping a distinct culture. This culture, referred to as that of digital inhabitants (Julien 2015), is made up of individuals who dedicate their time not just to the internet as a whole, but to online communities in particular. Such individuals develop unique skills that are specific to online culture. According to Julien (2015, 236), this results in a unique digital habitus, as the internet constitutes a new field. From this digitally oriented habitus, individuals create content and share their perceptions of the world.

The formation of a digital habitus can be understood as an extension of an individual's existing habitus, reshaped or expanded through engagement with digital environments. This is articulated in Bourdieu's formulation of the relationships among habitus, field, and capital, which suggests that practice emerges from the interaction between an individual's dispositions (habitus) and their position within a given field, as determined by their access to various forms of capital (Maton 2008, 51). In this case, the digital space constitutes the field in which these relations unfold. The digital field, with its own structures, hierarchies and logic, activates and reshapes an artist's dispositions, enabling new forms of practice that differ from those in traditional art worlds. The concept of *disposition* is crucial here, as it bridges the structural and agentic aspects of practice. As Bourdieu (1990, 53) explains, dispositions are both durable and transposable — structured by past conditions but capable of being activated across different fields. In the digital arena, the artist's disposition can generate new modes of perception, appreciation and action, allowing him or her to create and disseminate content, interact with diverse audiences, and develop alternative forms of cultural and symbolic capital. The digital habitus thus not only enables a reconfiguration of artistic practice but also facilitates the emergence of new aesthetic strategies, collaborative networks, and ways of performing visibility and authorship across a variety of digital platforms.

Analysing the digital habitus therefore requires attention to several interrelated dimensions. First, it involves an examination of digital competence (digital literacy), analogous to the role of symbolic capital in the traditional art field. Second, it considers the digital ethos—that is, the attitudes, values, and patterns of activity that shape how individuals participate in and perceive the digital environment, including the perceived benefits and risks of digital engagement. Finally, it requires an analysis of digital entrance, or the conditions that determine whether an

individual can access and participate in the digital field in the first place. This relates directly to the availability of material cultural capital, such as hardware, software, and reliable internet connectivity, as well as broader infrastructural and economic factors that enable or restrict meaningful participation in the digital sphere (Porubčinová 2017, 86). Without such material resources, the opportunities afforded by the digital field remain inaccessible, reinforcing inequalities and creating new forms of exclusion.

For independent artists, the evolving digital habitus is particularly significant, as it not only enables broader audience engagement and circumvents the hierarchies of traditional gallery and institutional systems, but also fosters the development of new skills, aesthetic approaches and strategies for creating and circulating artworks. However, it also introduces new parameters and hierarchies. Mihelj et al. (2019, 1466) suggest that the rise of digital platforms as the predominant conduit for mediated cultural engagement has greatly increased the volume, accessibility, and diversity of cultural content. At the same time, it has created new avenues for cultural distinction, segmentation, and inequality. Consequently, the proliferation of modern technologies has prompted a re-evaluation of traditional cultural hierarchies and structures (Mihelj et al. 2019, 1468).

2.7 Literature relating to independent artists

Independent artists occupy a unique position in the complex social structure of the art world in that they aim to work outside of traditional structures. In reviewing the literature on independent artists, I found substantial material focused on the publishing, music and film industries (e.g. Price 2016; Kartik and Mishra 2022). However, there appears to be limited research specifically addressing independent visual artists, particularly within the South African context. In a more lateral search, there is material on artist-run initiatives and spaces such as the notable contribution from Robyn Cook in her 2016 PhD thesis, *The New Institutions: Artist-Run Participative Platforms and Initiatives in South Africa*. This thesis examines how artists and cultural practitioners created independent, often alternative, physical spaces prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. While Cook's work offers valuable insights into the dynamics of artist-run initiatives, particularly artists establishing galleries of their own, it does not consider the range of individual strategies of independent artists or the role of digital platforms in shaping or supporting these spaces, nor how digital engagement has evolved alongside or in response to the limitations of physical infrastructure.

According to Kartik and Mishra (2022, 509), the rise of digital platforms has revolutionised the landscape for independent artists in the music industry, reshaping the way in which they

create, promote, and distribute their work (Kartik and Mishra 2022, 509). It has enabled greater accessibility to networks and opportunities through social media and digital marketplaces, giving rise to an age of self-representation. The present study explores how the use of the digital space by independent artists not only provides global accessibility and the possibility of self-representation but also plays a role in overcoming localised barriers such as limited access to physical gallery spaces, economic constraints, as well as historical inequalities within the Johannesburg art world.

In a recent paper, Ruoxi Liu (2024) investigates alternative feminist practices in response to the experience of gender marginalisation among independent artists in China. Liu (2024, 187) suggests that alternative art practices have helped diversify the expression and representation of independent female artists in Guangzhou, while also yielding strategies to negotiate and contest existing patriarchal conventions and imbalanced power relations. This mirrors, to some extent, how independent artists in a context like that of Johannesburg pursue alternative social and professional practices to challenge traditional gatekeeping structures and contribute to shifting trends in art world dynamics. However, while there is some resonance between situations, it is important to recognise that the social and political conditions under which Liu's subjects operate are quite different from those of artists in Johannesburg. The meaning and function of "independence" may thus differ significantly across geographies, shaped by local socio-economic structures, institutional systems and broader cultural politics. In the South African context, historical inequality, limited infrastructure and uneven access to markets continue to shape what it means to be an independent artist, often demanding different forms of resilience and innovation.

According to Liu (2024, 189) the term 'independent artist' can broadly be defined as an individual who creates and promotes their work outside of the traditional gallery system or without exclusive representation by a gallery, institution, or agent. From examining the experiences, perspectives and opinions of independent artists based in Johannesburg, it will become clear that the term 'independent' is insufficient to describe the way that certain artists are functioning outside of traditional representational structures. The qualitative part of this study will therefore result in a necessary refinement of the term.

Marschall (2001, 51) suggests that during the apartheid era, South African society and culture were shaped by segregationist principles that promoted the development of distinct traditions for each racial and ethnic group. During this period, art criticism and scholarship were predominantly influenced by formalist perspectives based on the Western model of art,

with a strict division between fine art and craft. Because Black South Africans were excluded from formal artistic training and the mainstream art sector, the division coincided with racial difference. Works by Black artists were exhibited, collected and written about as instances of craft and therefore not included in fine art galleries. The boundary between 'white art' and 'black craft' gradually began to shift during the 1980s with the rising influence of postmodernist theoretical discourse, which questioned hierarchic binaries and prized marginal cultures as a critique of Western culture (Marschall 2001, 52). Marschall argues that a new aesthetic awareness of the validity of different styles and modes of expression made possible by postmodernist thinking, together with a new interest in artistic manifestations of ethnic diversity, made it possible for the work of Black artists such as Jackson Hlungwane to gain recognition and find its way into fine art galleries (Marschall 2001, 52). At the same time, alternative spaces such as the Polly Street Art Centre (1952) and collective exchange programmes like the Triangle workshops (1982) gave independent artists critical support to develop their practices and network outside of the boundaries of South Africa.

2.8 Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has introduced Bourdieu's key theoretical concepts of habitus, field, and capital, while also providing an overview of the digital space and the evolving role of independent artists within the field of art in Johannesburg. Bourdieu's theories provide a way to analyse the social structure of the Johannesburg art world as well as the situation of independent artists and how they negotiate this situation through the accumulation of capital. The terms of reference are valuable for examining traditional ways of acquiring cultural, economic and social (symbolic) capital in relation to the way that artists are nowadays able to acquire and exchange forms of capital in the digital space.

The chapter has focused on the application of Bourdieu's concepts to the field of art, with particular attention to independent artists in Johannesburg. It has established a theoretical foundation that is elaborated in chapters Four and Five, where the expansion of digital platforms and social media is critically examined to determine if and how this has created new opportunities for independent artists in Johannesburg beyond the traditional gallery system, specifically between the years 2020 and 2024.

Chapter Three will provide a detailed account of the methodology employed to gather the data.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This section outlines the research methodology and rationale behind the methods and sampling techniques selected for the study. It discusses how Bourdieu's theoretical concepts of habitus, field and capital, as outlined in the previous chapter, inform the data collection process and analysis to answer the question of whether the expansion of digital platforms has led to new possibilities beyond the gallery system for independent artists in Johannesburg between 2020 and 2024.

This study aims to explore the motivations behind selected artists' identification as 'independent,' their artistic practices and the position they occupy in the field of art in Johannesburg. It seeks to understand the logic and rules governing the field of art in Johannesburg and how the mobilisation of independent artists into the digital space has facilitated more autonomous practices.

It is argued that the strategies of independent artists, along with their unconventional methods and relationships with existing structures, have opened up new possibilities beyond the gallery system that involve disrupting existing power relations and gatekeeping traditions. These alternatives allow artists to navigate the art world in ways that are comparable to traditional gallery practices, but on their own terms. For example, exclusive physical spaces and interactions are being replaced with or complemented by open-access online platforms, which enable engagement with both local and international audiences. Digital platforms also facilitate the display of artworks online and the production of digital exhibitions, reducing high production costs while still providing contextualisation and visibility.

Bourdieu advocated a methodology that integrates his concepts of habitus, field and capital, as an interdependent and co-constructed trio in which no single concept is dominant, primary, or causal. He argued that these concepts are integral to understanding the social world and function collectively in ways that can only be understood through case-by-case deconstruction (Thompson in Grenfell 2008, 68). I have adopted these theoretical postulates as the foundation for research aiming to determine the dispositions of independent artists, the social dynamics and power structures within the Johannesburg field of art, as well as the way in which independent artists acquire and leverage various forms of capital.

In this process, understanding the role of the digital space is essential, as it not only affects individual artists but also has broader implications for the field of art production and consumption in Johannesburg. This will be discussed in depth in Chapter 4. The study also investigates whether independent artists can accumulate substantial social, cultural, and economic capital – traditionally bestowed by galleries and educational and other public institutions – through their use of the digital space. To achieve these objectives, qualitative research was undertaken, involving in-depth interviews with independent artists and other art world practitioners.

A qualitative approach was adopted as it was more likely to capture detail and nuance in the experiences of independent artists, the strategies employed in their practices and the changes they have experienced over a period of time. Given the limited literature on independent artists in the field of art, a comparative analysis with literature and documents on independent artists in related fields (such as performing arts and publishing) contributed towards a contextual understanding of how digital spaces impact the evolving dynamics of the art world and the potential for independent artists to thrive. I have also drawn on reports on the arts in South Africa such as *Art in South Africa: A Short Survey* (1972) by Frieda Harmsen and *South African Art Market: Pricing and Patterns* (2019) by Mary Corrigall to inform my understanding of the logic of the field and the power structures that inform it.

The interviews and comparative analysis of relevant literature are complemented by secondary data sources, including opinions by critics, gallery practitioners and historians as well as news articles, blogs and editorials relating to artists who see their practice as independent from gallery structures and who direct the display of their works at a larger viewership. In other words, I canvass the views not only of people who frequent galleries, collect art or are broadly associated with gallery practices but also of those who occupy space on digital platforms.

The study aims thereby to contribute to the discourse on the evolving nature of artistic independence and the impact of digital technology on the art community, ultimately providing insights into the viability of independent artists' careers. This chapter presents a detailed outline of the research design (including the application of Bourdieu's hypotheses), of the methods employed and the processes involved in the research.

3.2. Developing a method based on Bourdieu's notions of habitus, field, and capital

The method to be developed seeks to understand the dispositions that shape the decisions and practices of independent artists, the field structure and dynamics at play, as well as the forms of capital that independent artists are able to acquire and exchange in both physical and digital spaces.

The concept of habitus will be used to investigate independent artists' embodied dispositions and ways of thinking – shaped by their backgrounds and experiences – that affect their artistic practices and interactions within the physical art world and digital space. I will identify the dispositions that influence how artists create and present their work and how these dispositions align with or diverge from broader art world practices or expectations in Johannesburg. I will further investigate the specific social, economic and cultural conditions of Johannesburg that pertain to the local art scene as well as the social networks of independent artists and how they engage with the art world and their audience.

The concept of field enabled Bourdieu to map objective structural relations, but he demonstrated how such objectivity was constructed by subjectivities constituted by the habitus of individuals (Grenfell 2008, 4). I will adopt a similar approach to analyse the field structure and dynamics of the art world, including how the logic and power structures in the physical field intersect with the emerging digital field. Bourdieu's (1993b, 108) approach to analysing a field, as discussed in Chapter 1, will be applied to the digital space, construed as a field in itself.

Bourdieu's use of field as a methodology has been criticised for being too determinist and not addressing changeability or social change in the field (Thompson, in Grenfell 2008, 79). However, Bourdieu shows how social agents can experience change in fields where there is a disjunction between their habitus and the current conditions in the field. An example from this research is the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had on art-world practices, which forced a change in the field of art, globally. Field analysis will therefore include the question of how the development of new technologies, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, has led to change in the field of art and arguably created a subfield with its own set of rules and logic that enable artists to bypass existing systems of access to audiences and opportunities.

This study will also examine various forms of capital – cultural, social and economic – that independent artists acquire, possess, utilise and exchange. Understanding the types of capital and how these forms of capital are leveraged both in physical spaces (e.g., galleries) and digital

spaces (e.g., social media, websites, online services, etc.) is a key component of this investigation. Further analysing how these types of capital are valued and distributed in the field of art in Johannesburg will also help clarify how independent artists are positioned within the field. These conceptual tools, with an example of their application to independent artists in Johannesburg are summarised below in Table 3.1.

Terminology	Definition	Example
Habitus	Developing attitudes and dispositions influenced by social structures and the way in which individuals choose to engage in practices.	An independent artist who obtained their art education outside of Johannesburg would not have the same network as an artist who studied for an arts degree in Johannesburg, which might motivate them more to expand their visibility and network using the digital space.
Field	A network of objective relationships connected and anchored in different types of capital.	The Johannesburg art field is determined by the position of agents (artists, galleries, privately owned institutions, collective artist studios) and the network of their relationships within this field.
Capital	Different forms of capital such as economic, cultural and social – referring to areas such as knowledge, experience and social connections that can give an individual or group influence or power to succeed in their field.	Independent artists acquire a large network of connections in the digital space and develop independent productive networks with museums or collectors that lead to exhibitions or sales of works.

Table 3.1. Summary of the terms habitus, field and capital as applied to independent artists in the Johannesburg art world

3.3 Research Design

The research design for this study is grounded in a qualitative methodology and uses semi-structured, in-person interviews as the primary instrument for data collection. These interviews, conducted with independent artists and other practitioners in the field of art in Johannesburg, are complemented by surveys and relevant online articles and documents to provide a comprehensive understanding of the field dynamics, including the impact of digital technologies since the COVID-19 pandemic. I also distributed a second questionnaire to willing

respondents relating to specific practices and experiences regarding their use of the digital space.

The selection of interview participants, the data collection process and the subsequent analysis were all undertaken with Bourdieu's key concepts in mind. Bourdieu's notion of reflexivity was invoked to include observations on artists' practices and the broader art field from my specific position as an arts professional, gallerist and independent artist. Bourdieu critiques traditional social science approaches that claim neutrality and objectivity in their research or findings, recommending instead a self-aware approach that acknowledges the researcher's subjectivity and its influence on their work (Bourdieu 1990a, 207). Adopting a reflexive viewpoint does not reject objectivity, but rather questions the privilege of claiming to fully understand a subject (Bourdieu 1990a, 207). Bourdieu argues that researchers must reflect on their own positions within the field, including how their social background, habitus, and personal experiences may be shaping their interpretations or findings.

Bourdieu's theory of habitus, field and capital also influenced the selection of interview participants, who were drawn from different age groups, educational backgrounds, and cultural contexts. Participants were also selected across a spectrum of visibility and career success, and from different collective studio locations. This strategy sought to capture a representative range of independent artists in Johannesburg by aligning itself with Bourdieu's emphasis on understanding the relational dynamics within a field.

Bourdieu's hypotheses helped to shape the interview questions and guide the investigation. The questions sought to explore how independent artists navigate the Johannesburg art world using the digital space and the effects of this on the broader art world.

- Habitus: Questions relating to habitus were designed to uncover patterns in how artists' education, cultural influences and personal experiences shape their artistic practices. In some cases, data concerning habitus was gathered from desk research rather than directly from interviews. Questions include: What is your background, what did you study, what is your experience of working with galleries and why do you identify as an independent artist?
- Field: The concept of field informed questions aimed at understanding artists' positions and perceptions of power dynamics within the Johannesburg art world. The concept was used to explore whether the digital space can be considered an independent field with its own structures and rules, or whether it is merely supplementary to the physical art

world. Questions include: How do you perceive the role of traditional art institutions such as galleries as gatekeepers and agents responsible for attributing forms of capital, and how has that role evolved and changed over time? How do you leverage digital platforms to create visibility/promote yourself or your work or build your career?

- Capital: Bourdieu's concept of capital guided the gathering of data regarding the motivations of artists, especially within the digital space. The analysis considers the transferability of different forms of capital – cultural, social, economic, digital, and symbolic –between the digital and physical art fields. Questions include: Have you made use of the digital space to navigate the art world? If yes, how have you engaged with and benefitted from the use of digital platforms and particularly social media?

Bourdieu's theories have thus provided a framework for various aspects of the research method, from selecting the participants, to the formulations of questions and the development of codes for analysis of the data.

3.4 Methodological approach

The research is situated within the qualitative tradition, employing an interpretivist, reflexive methodology. This approach seeks to provide an in-depth understanding of independent artists' experiences outside of traditional art world structures. An interpretivist approach emphasises the importance of context and the participants' perspectives, acknowledging the interplay between objectivity and subjectivity. It suggests that knowledge is a function of perceptions rather than objective realities (Flynn 2016, 158). This is consonant with Bourdieu's view that social scientists must consider the context of participants as well as their own habitus in the process of interpreting data (Bourdieu 1990b).

Bourdieu's work seeks to move beyond dichotomies such as objectivism versus subjectivism, structure versus agency, and determinism versus phenomenology. Central to his conceptual framework, as we have seen, are the concepts of habitus and field which provide a way to understand individuals as socially situated with embodied dispositions shaped by their positions within specific social and professional fields (Kenway and McLeod 2004, 528). According to Kenway and McLeod (2004, 528), a reflexive approach is key to understanding the interplay between field and habitus, or the relationship between external structures and internalised dispositions. Bourdieu (1993a, 63) defines reflexivity as "the scientific objectification of the subject of objectification," a process that involves the researcher critically examining himself or herself using the same analytical tools that are applied to the subjects of

the investigation. The concept requires the researcher to scrutinise their own assumptions, biases, and positioning to assess how such factors might influence the research process and its findings (Deer 2008, 201).

As a reflexive practitioner within the French academic and intellectual scene, Bourdieu did not distinguish sharply between theory and practice. He argued that theory must be informed by practice and vice versa (Waterfield 2015, 1). Bourdieu (2000, 99) recognised that each field generates its own distinct perspective on the world. For sociology, this means interrogating its intellectual dispositions, epistemic history, and unconscious biases rather than focusing solely on the personal views of the researcher. This process of reflexive scrutiny allows for a deeper understanding of the dynamics at play within a given field, making Bourdieu's methodological framework invaluable for analysing the lived experiences and professional practices of independent artists navigating the complexities of the Johannesburg art world.

3.4.1 Sampling and participant selection

The interview samples are organised as follows:

I. Independent artists provided an understanding of their habitus, practices, motivations and experiences in the art world, their relationship to other art world participants and their use of the digital space in their practice.
II. Gallerists granted insights into the traditional gallery structure and its interaction with independent artists as well as the gallery's use of the digital space.
III. Art specialists and other practitioners provided a broader perspective on the field of art, their affiliation or role in the practices of independent artists, as well as the evolving dynamics of the field and the implications of increasing use of the digital space.

The data collected through these interviews has been analysed according to the framework constituted by Bourdieu's key theoretical concepts. The framework makes possible a theoretical explanation of the power dynamics, positions and interactions among participants, the structure and field dynamics of the Johannesburg art world, and the expansion of the field to the digital space. It also addresses the accumulation and exchange of capital by independent artists using social media and other digital platforms.

3.4.2 Primary data collection instrument: semi-structured, in-depth interviews

The primary research instrument utilised in the qualitative phase of this study was the in-person, semi-structured interview. Interviews were conducted with 27 participants, consisting of 15 independent artists practising in Johannesburg, 2 independent artist/gallery owners and 10 prominent gallerists, critics, art historians and other specialists. This method facilitated an interactive dialogue, allowing participants to respond to a series of pre-determined open-ended questions while providing the flexibility for follow-up inquiries to deepen and sharpen an understanding of their responses. The result was a set of reliable and comparable qualitative data (Cohen and Crabtree 2006).

This approach enables the collection of in-depth, qualitative data to capture the experiences and perspectives of independent artists, gallerists, art specialists, and other art world practitioners. Importantly, it allows independent artists to reflect in their own words on their trajectories, motivations and struggles in the art world.

Participants were identified by means of personal and online engagement on social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn and WhatsApp, as well as through my professional practice as a gallerist[8] and practising independent artist. The sample included individuals of different genders and cultural backgrounds, ranging in age from 28 to 70.

[8] In addition to my role as researcher, I am currently the director of David Krut Projects, which has a print workshop in the inner city of Johannesburg as well as associated galleries and publishing activities. There should not be any risk of bias or coercion during the interview process as the organisation functions mainly as a collaborative project space and focusses on long-term but not exclusive collaboration with associated or invited artists, who may be independent or represented by any other gallery. The organisation does not focus on representing artists. The selection process for artists to work in collaboration with the David Krut Project and workshop is a group effort and is not solely my responsibility.

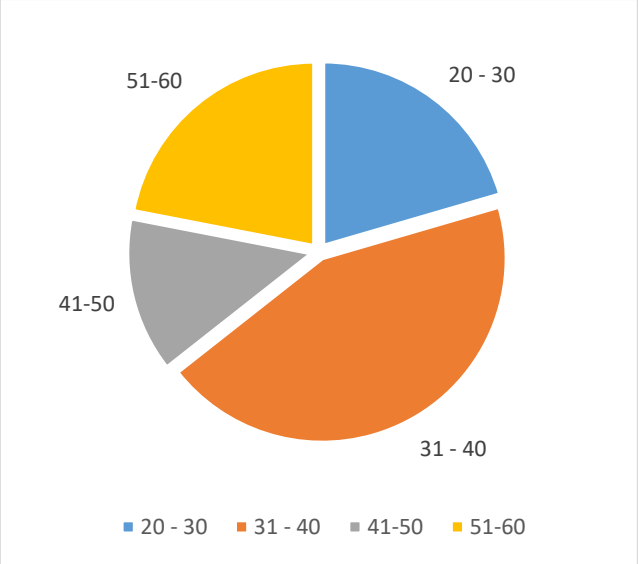


Figure 3.1. Age chart of selected independent artists

The selected artists possess formal qualifications in the fine arts, including Bachelor of Fine Arts (BFA) and Master of Fine Arts (MFA) degrees. Most were educated at universities in Johannesburg, while three hold additional qualifications from international institutions. Focusing on artists with a formal art education was intentional, as it situates the sample within both an established body of knowledge and the context of the Johannesburg field of art[9].

In addition to the artists, a sample of art world professionals, including gallerists, art specialists, agents, writers, and critics, was included to gain a more rounded understanding of the local art ecosystem. The interviews aimed to collect insights on these professionals' experiences of working with artists, their contributions to the artists' development, and their perspectives on the viability of independent artistic practice. The interviews also explored the impact of the digital space on art world practices before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

The sampling strategy employed purposive and referential techniques. Initial participants were identified based on their independent status and my familiarity with their work within the Johannesburg art scene. These contacts subsequently recommended additional individuals to contribute to the study. Recruitment involved contacting potential participants via email, which

[9] The decision to focus on independent artists with formal education in art or related qualifications aimed at delineating the nature of their independence. Their independent status does not stem from a lack of formal training from academic or institutional backgrounds. Rather, these artists are already embedded within the professional field by virtue of their education. Their choice to operate independently is thus understood as a strategic and intentional response to the specific conditions and structural limitations of the contemporary art field in Johannesburg.

included a request for an interview along with a participant information sheet detailing the study's title and parameters, a consent form, and an ethics clearance certificate from the University of the Witwatersrand. All the interviews were scheduled directly with the participants, who provided their informed and written consent for data collection. The interviews spanned a period of eighteen months. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed, with the exception of one artist who provided written responses.

The interview questions focused on describing the practices of independent artist's artists' practices, the selection processes employed by galleries, and the dynamics between artists, galleries, and third parties such as agents and auction houses. Additionally, inquiries were made into the use of digital platforms in the art world, examining the consequences of this engagement across different phases of the pandemic.

Artist name	Age	Career Stage	Degree	Institution	Previous gallery representation
Joni Brenner	51-60	Mid/Late	BAFA AND MFA	Wits School of Art	N
Bevan De Wet	31-40	Mid	BFA	Rhodes University	N
Stephen Hobbs	51-60	Mid/Late	BAFA	Wits School of Art	N
Roxy Kaczmarek	31-40	Early	BAFA / MFA	Michaelis School of Art, Cape Town / University of Johannesburg	N
Andrew Kayser	41-50	Mid	BAFA	Royal Academy of Art, Den Haag	N
Banele Khoza	20-30	Early	Fine Arts	Tshwane University of Technology	Y
Lebohang Mabusela	20-30	Early	BAFA	Wits School of Art	N
Qhamanande Maswana	31-40	Early	Certificate in Fine Arts at Lovedale College (2010) and a National Diploma in Fine Arts	University of Fort Hare Lovedale College	N
Cinthia Mulanga	20-30	Early	Printmaking	Artist Proof Studio	N
Phumulani Ntuli	31-40	Early/Mid	B(Tech) Fine Arts/ MFA	University of Johannesburg / Valais School of Art, Switzerland	N
Chloe Reid	31-40	Mid	MA in Creative Writing/ MFA	Wits School of Art / Glasgow School of Art	Y
Jake Singer	31-40	Mid	MFA	Michaelis School of Arts Cape Town	Y
Johan Stegman	20-30	Early	Engineering		N
Richardt. Strydom	50-60	Mid	BAFA		N
Mbali Tshabalala	31-40	Early	Printmaking	Artist Proof Studio	N
MJ. Turpin	40-50	Mid	BAFA (Honours)		N
Nathan Vuuren	31-40	Early/mid	MFA	Wits School of Art	N

Table 3.2. Participating artists' information

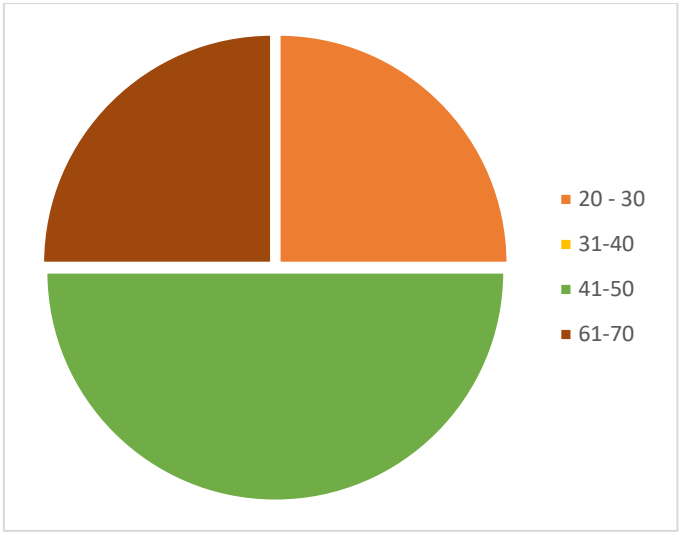


Figure 3.2. Age chart of art professionals

Name	Age	Role	Institution	Works with independent artists
Anthea Buys	41-50	Writer and gallerist Independent curator	Guns and Rain	NA
Roberta Coci	41-50	Co-founder and Director	Latitudes Online	
Banele Khoza	20-30	Artist and gallery owner	BKhz	Y
Alexia Leitich	41-50	Indepednent practitioner/curator working with independent artists	Independent	Y
Teresa Lizamore	61-70	Gallery Owner and corporate consultant	Lizamore and Associates Gallery	Y
Lucy MacGarry	41-50	Founder and Director	Latitudes Online/ Latitudes Art Fair	Y
Mark Read	61-70	Founder Director	Everard Read Gallery	N
Julie Taylor	41-50	Founder and Director	Guns and Rain	Y
MJ Turpin	41-50	Artist and gallery owner	Kalashnikov Gallery	N
Wilhelm van Rensburg	61-70	Arts specialist, writer, arts educator	Strauss and Co Auctioneers	Y

Table 3.3. Art professionals' information

3.4.3 Secondary data

Data collected from interviews was supplemented by secondary data sources, including surveys relating to the arts in South Africa or Johannesburg in particular (Corrigall 2019), opinions and

critiques from art critics, online editors, as well as other media sources such as articles and blogposts. These sources focus on topics ranging from independent practice in Johannesburg – such as "The New Artistic Age of Self-Representation" by Anthea Buys (2008) – to Jelena Marinovic's "How Coronavirus Makes the Art World Go On (Line)" (2020), which offers an international perspective on the impact on the artworld of the COVID-19 pandemic. Another important source is "The Impact of Digital Media, Virtual Reality, and Computer-Generated Art on Traditional Art Forms" (2024) by Lan Kong et al., which tracks the effect of digital technologies and particularly social media on broader art-world practices. There are also interviews with artists[10] who view their practice as independent of traditional gallery structures, and who actively manage the presentation of their work to a broader audience than that which typically visits galleries, collects art, or is otherwise associated with conventional gallery practices.

Further secondary data was gathered from editorials discussing the practices of independent artists and the influence of digital spaces on the art world, artists, and collectors, as published on Latitudes Online. The analysis of this data follows a qualitative pattern, incorporating elements of discourse analysis. This approach enables examination of the specific idiom and terminology prevalent in the art world, particularly how independent artists employ distinctive language to articulate strong opinions about the art ecosystem in which they operate.

The pandemic has notably accelerated the digital transformation within the field of art, prompting galleries and independent artists alike to adapt to new modes of production, presentation, and engagement with audiences. Many have turned to online viewing platforms and virtual exhibitions, reshaping their strategies to maintain visibility and connection with collectors and art enthusiasts. This shift has not only expanded the reach of independent artists but has also fostered a more inclusive dialogue about art beyond the confines of traditional gallery spaces.

[10] Latitudes Editorial. "Latitudes Sits Down with Artist Phumulani Ntuli," December 1, 2023. https://editorial.latitudes.online/blog/posts/latitudes-sits-down-with-artist-phumulani-ntuli/.

3.5 Qualitative data analysis

3.5.1 Overview

Qualitative research seeks to generate knowledge grounded in human experiences (Sandelowski 2004). In this study, qualitative data analysis methods were employed to analyse data gathered from the semi-structured interviews conducted with independent artists and other art world professionals. The approach yielded a rich resource for understanding the complexities of the dispositions of independent artists and other art world participants as well as the logic of the field of art in Johannesburg.

The semi-structured interview format combines the discipline of pre-determined (open-ended) questions with the flexibility to explore themes emerging from the interviews. The format allows the participants to verbalise their experiences and insights in their own terms. Both inductive and deductive methods, as well as thematic analysis, were used in the coding process to categorise the responses and identify and evaluate the resultant patterns.

3.5.2 Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis is a qualitative research method that can be widely used across a range of epistemologies and research questions (Nowell et al. 2017, 2). It is a method for identifying, analysing, organising, describing and reporting themes found within a set of data. It is capable of producing trustworthy and insightful findings (Braun and Clarke 2006). According to King (2004) and Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is a useful method for examining the perspectives of different research participants, highlighting similarities and differences and generating unanticipated insights.

The flexibility of thematic analysis is one of its notable characteristics, and can be both an advantage and a disadvantage. On the one hand, a primary advantage of thematic analysis is its adaptability to a wide range of studies and contexts. It allows for the tailoring of analytical approaches to fit the nuances of specific data, leading to a comprehensive account of participants' experiences and perspectives. The ability to explore diverse themes enables capture of the complexity of social phenomena. By applying both inductive and deductive logic to the data, thematic analysis can uncover new insights while also testing existing theory. However, the same flexibility can also present challenges. The lack of a rigid framework may lead to inconsistency and a lack of coherence in the analysis, particularly if there is no clear strategy for organising and interpreting findings. Without a structured approach, there is a risk

that themes may be derived in a way that is subjective and this can undermine the credibility of the research (Holloway and Todres 2003, in Nowell et al. 2017, 2). Consistency and cohesion can be maintained by taking a clear epistemological stance and providing a coherent rationale for thematic interpretations (Holloway and Todres 2003).

Data analysis in this study was guided by a dual approach, drawing on themes that emerged from the data itself (inductive) while also being informed by Bourdieu's theoretical concepts of habitus, field and capital (deductive). This approach allowed for the emergence of unexpected themes such as the desire of artists to have greater autonomy, and the importance of artist-run spaces in establishing that autonomy. It further highlighted the complex interplay of capital, field dynamics and habitus in the Johannesburg art field.

To code and categorise the collected data involved a sustained focus on the ideas, feelings and concerns expressed by independent artists, along with insights from other art world practitioners. These included their understanding of value, their experiences with galleries and institutions, and how the relationships among artists, galleries, institutions, and other art world professionals had evolved through their engagement with digital platforms.

3.5.3 Identifying themes from the interviews

Working systematically, I developed an effective procedure for interviewing, transcribing, and coding, which led to the identification of underlying themes across the interviews. These themes reflect the diverse perspectives of artists and arts professionals concerning their roles, the challenges they face, and the impact of digital media on their practices. The coding process and the development of themes were guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework for thematic analysis. The process involved five phases:

1. Familiarisation with the data. The interview transcripts were thoroughly reviewed, and notes were taken on recurring ideas, attitudes and concepts voiced by participants.
2. Identifying codes and searching for overarching themes. The codes identified were then examined for broader patterns, leading to the development of themes. These included artworld dynamics and navigation, independent artist practices, use of the digital space and capital accumulation, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.
3. Interpreting the themes through Bourdieu's framework of habitus, field and capital. The themes identified in phase 2 were then interpreted and categorised according to Bourdieu's three concepts. This process included the use of AI. First, an AI tool was used

to summarise the various codes, streamlining the data for efficient thematic analysis. Secondly, the summarised codes were fed back into the AI system, guiding the interpretation of the data through the lens of Bourdieu's theoretical framework. For instance, 'use of the digital space and capital accumulation' was refined to reflect the strategies that independent artists used in the digital space to build digital social capital and develop a new digital habitus.

Reviewing and refining the themes allowed me to capture the essence of the data more accurately. This iterative process of analysis and refinement facilitated the development of a clear analytical narrative. The narrative explains how Bourdieu's theoretical concepts interact with the study's context and how the themes identified collectively convey the scope and meaning of the research. This detailed approach ensured that the analysis was both theoretically grounded and authentically reflective of the diverse experiences of the interview subjects.

4. Defining and naming the themes. The themes identified were further refined in terms of the research questions associated with Bourdieu's theoretical framework. By incorporating Bourdieu's concepts into the data analysis, I was able to structure the data into a set of concepts that drive independent practice through the notion of habitus while provide a comprehensive understanding of the experiences and challenges faced by artists choosing to practise independently. Using the concept of field, I situated artists' practices within the broader context of the art world, highlighting the structural factors that shape their trajectories and the potential of digital platforms to disrupt or reinforce existing power dynamics. Drawing on Bourdieu's notion of capitals for the analysis, I was able to determine how artists acquire social capital using the digital space. I further examined how this social capital is converted into other forms of capital – such as economic or symbolic capital – thereby influencing the artists' status and opportunities within the art world.

5. Producing the report. This step involved presenting the themes with specific quotations from participants in three sections: Chapter 4, Mapping the Johannesburg art scene; Chapter 5, The impact of the digital space and social media on the art world; and Chapter 6, Independent artists in Johannesburg.

In addition to the themes identified on the basis of commonalities from the interviews, data is drawn from field observations made through direct engagement at events such as

exhibitions or studio conversations, as well as insights from social media and other documents. These resources highlight specific practices employed by artists, such as frequent posting, the types of posts shared, audience responses (e.g. comments or likes), and regular engagement with followers. Identifying such practices can offer valuable insights into how symbolic capital is being generated.

All these complementary sources help to establish a more comprehensive picture of the practices of independent artists and the impact of their strategies on the broader art field.

Figure 3.3, below, offers a visualisation of overarching themes and related codes from data gathered during the interview process.



Figure 3.3. Overarching themes and related codes from data gathered during the interview process

3.5.4 Comparative analysis

To explore the practices of independent artists, it is necessary to examine their motives for positioning themselves outside of traditional gallery structures, their approaches to audience

engagement, and how these approaches are similar to or different from those associated with operating within the formal system of galleries and other institutions.

The study compares the experience of independent artists in the digital space with that of those operating within traditional frameworks. This involves documenting and examining artists' perspectives on the opportunities and challenges they face as independent artists, and how those opportunities and challenges are mitigated, replicated or transformed in the digital space. The study also assesses how these strategies and online engagements have altered the dynamics of art production and consumption in Johannesburg.

The objective is to determine whether the digital expansion has led to new possibilities for independent artists in terms of accumulating social, cultural and economic capital. The study therefore seeks to establish whether these new possibilities have affected independent artists' relationships with other art world practitioners in the physical space, and if they are assisting artists to enjoy sustainable and successful careers.

By examining the interplay between habitus, field, and capital, this research aims to contribute to the discourse on artistic independence and the impact of digital technology on the art community. It will provide insights into how independent artists in Johannesburg operate and thrive in an increasingly digital landscape, ultimately enhancing our understanding of the evolving nature of artistic careers in the contemporary art world.

3.6 Limitations of methodology

There are several limitations inherent in the chosen methodology. A significant limitation is that not all respondents who were contacted were able to participate in interviews. This may have resulted in the sample not being as representative as it could have been, perhaps omitting valuable perspectives and experiences.

A second limitation lies in the possibility that artists may have withheld information about working with galleries and institutions for fear of being denied future showing opportunities. Such self-censorship could affect the integrity of the data collected. The participants were in fact explicitly afforded the right to keep some information confidential and also to review what was included in the final report.

Other limitations pertained to the information received from participants regarding their use of the digital space. Not all respondents demonstrated equal proficiency. Their varying levels of digital literacy could have impacted the findings or overlooked important aspects of the digital strategies employed by more proficient users. A second questionnaire with more specific questions regarding the use of the digital space was distributed among interview participants as well as other artists in order to address the possible problem.

3.7 Ethical considerations

As this study involves interviews with human subjects and explores aspects of their careers and relationships in the Johannesburg art field, it is important to consider the implications of their participation, and the nature of the data collected. In this regard, two key areas of concern were identified.

First, there was a potential concern regarding the researcher-participant relationship, given my dual role as a gallerist and independent artist in Johannesburg. This duality raised the possibility of a conflict of interest, which could influence participants' willingness to share information about their experiences and practices openly. To address this concern, I disclosed my position at David Krut Projects[11] to participants, providing an information sheet clarifying the nature of the organisation and its collaborations, demonstrating that there was no risk of bias or coercion.

Secondly, careful consideration was given to the potential repercussions that participants' disclosures could have for their careers. Recognising the highly networked and reputation-sensitive nature of the art world, deliberate measures were taken to ensure that no collected data would negatively impact or disadvantage participants in any way. To address these concerns, I adhered to several key principles throughout the research process, ensuring that participants felt secure in sharing their experiences, opinions, and problems without fear of adverse consequences.

[11] David Krut Projects functions primarily as a collaborative project space, focusing on long-term but non-exclusive collaborations with associated or invited artists, whether independent or represented by other galleries. The organisation does not operate as a traditional gallery that formally represents artists. Additionally, the selection process for artists working with David Krut Projects and its workshop is a collective effort involving multiple stakeholders, and decisions are not solely based on my opinion. This transparency aimed to reassure participants that their participation in the study would not influence their professional standing or relationships.

Prior to engaging with participants, I completed a research ethics course at the University of Witwatersrand that equipped me with the necessary knowledge to navigate potential ethical dilemmas. Following this training, I obtained an ethics clearance certificate that formalised my commitment to ethical research practices. This preparation was essential for addressing any ethical concerns that might arise during the interview process. That process ensured that artists and other participants were fully aware of my position in the art world and the nature of the institution where I practised; they were apprised of the research's purpose, methods, and any potential risks involved. By providing an information sheet describing the study, I placed participants in a position to make informed decisions regarding their involvement. The consent form they completed indicated their understanding of the research and their voluntary participation, including their recognition of their right to withdraw at any point without consequence.

Participants were informed that their interviews would be audio-recorded and that direct quotations from the interviews might be included in the report. While their names might be used, I emphasised that their confidentiality would be respected. In instances where participants requested that specific information remain confidential, I honoured those requests. I also took care to address the potential impact of sensitive disclosures relating to participants' artistic practices, critiques of galleries and broader art world practices, as well as challenges the artists faced in their professional environments. To minimise adverse repercussions, I allowed the participants to review and provide feedback on how their statements were represented. Any content that they felt required revision or withdrawal was excluded from the final report.

3.8 Conclusion

This research is driven by an interest in understanding how independent artists operate in the art world and whether the use of the digital space has been effective in helping them develop and maintain autonomous and successful practices within the Johannesburg art scene. This chapter has described how Bourdieu's theory of habitus, field, and capital was applied in the development of a framework for analysing the art field in which the artists operate. The concept of habitus was employed to explore why and how artists pursue independent art practices. The analysis also considers the positions of institutions and galleries, examining the role of capital in understanding how the dominance of commercial galleries is established. It explores how artists accumulate various forms of capital in both the digital and physical art fields, and how they can exchange and leverage this capital to enhance their positions in the art world.

The following chapter provides a selective mapping of the Johannesburg art field in relation to Bourdieu's concept of field, set against the backdrop of the city's socio-political history. It considers the positions of institutions, galleries, and alternative spaces, while analysing the hierarchy within the field and how it is navigated by independent artists.

Chapter 4: Selective mapping of the Johannesburg art field

4.1 Introduction

The field of art in Johannesburg is shaped by a complex history of cultural diversity. It consists of an intricate network of artists, commercial galleries, collective artist-run spaces, museums and contemporary institutions. This network forms a dynamic system of operations which is constantly shifting with its environment, as new voices emerge and traditional structures evolve. Traditionally, artists have navigated the Johannesburg art field through the mediation of established galleries and institutions that offer visibility for their work and opportunities for engagement with a broader audience, including collectors at exhibitions, art fairs and even international presentations of their work. While these established institutions play a crucial role in exhibiting and promoting art, they can impose institutional constraints, ideological or conceptual, that artists may prefer to avoid or which make these spaces difficult to access.

In recent years Johannesburg has witnessed a surge of independent cultural production, characterised by a growing network of galleries, collectives and alternative spaces that provide platforms for emerging and established artists to work outside of the confines of commercial pressures or gallery elitism. These independent spaces exist alongside more traditional structures, collectively constituting the vibrant field of cultural production in Johannesburg. Alternative spaces offer artists the freedom to create and showcase their work without the limitations adumbrated above. They serve as essential platforms for artists to develop their practice and grow their network, as well as to engage with critical social and political issues often overlooked by mainstream institutions. By providing spaces for more voices and alternative narratives, independent cultural production plays an important role in shaping the city's cultural landscape and fostering a more inclusive and diverse art community.

This chapter begins with an exploration of the historical context that has formed, and continues to form, the city's cultural landscape. It then outlines notable structures and the various levels at which the art world in Johannesburg operates. The galleries and institutions discussed in this chapter have been selected for their particular significance in the conditions of art production in Johannesburg and their relevance to the practices of independent artists, rather than by any attempt to provide a comprehensive survey of galleries operating in the city. By mapping these selected spaces, the chapter establishes the context in which independent artists operate. In addition, I will highlight historical events that have driven significant shifts within the art field, examining how they have influenced opportunities and relationships between artists and

institutions. I will go on to discuss the rise of independent art spaces in Johannesburg and how these spaces support independent cultural production.

4.2 Historical context of Johannesburg

> A city (whether global or not) is not simply a string of infrastructures, technologies, and legal entities, however networked these are. It also comprises actual bodies, images, forms, footprints and memories. (Mbembe and Nutall 2008, 8)

This remark resonates strongly with Johannesburg; a city whose physical and human landscapes bear the imprints of its complex and often fractured social history. Johannesburg, often seen as a city of contrasts, reflects the complexities of its socio-political history, particularly in the post-apartheid era. Johannesburg emerged as a mining settlement established in 1886 following the discovery of gold on the farm, Langlaagte. It is today South Africa's industrial heart and Africa's wealthiest city (Lossgott 2017, 221). According to *An Assessment of the Visual Arts in South Africa*, a report commissioned by the Department of Arts and Culture in 2010, South Africa had the most robust and structurally sophisticated visual arts economy on the continent, with Johannesburg and Cape Town as its art capitals (Corrigall 2019, 3). The social historian Charles van Onselen (2001) has described Johannesburg as "a young, sprawling, polycentric people magnet motivated by opportunity and riddled with challenges." Johannesburg as a city has continually been torn down and rebuilt, evidencing rapid economic expansion despite the socioeconomic reality of the large numbers of South Africans living in poverty (Lossgott 2017, 222). The art world persists through a system that, to some extent, still operates through predominantly white gatekeepers, revealing power relations reproduced by all art institutions (Lossgott 2017, 222).

The emergence of Johannesburg as a "distinctive commercial civilisation" was propelled by the wealth of colonisers, especially that of the goldmine owners who capitalised on the labour of Black migrant workers, simultaneously indispensable and expendable in the mining industry. The institutionalisation of apartheid in the years following 1948 accelerated the exploitative dynamic shaping the city's economic landscape while embedding systemic inequalities in its social fabric. Apartheid laws enforced strict racial segregation across all aspects of life for Black South Africans (Nettleton 2020, 6). Education became increasingly divided into sectors of privilege and deprivation, while the urban cultural scene was dominated by European art forms such as ballet, opera, and theatre, performed in both private and publicly funded venues. The fine arts sector reflected this exclusivity, as museums and galleries at the time primarily

showcased works created by white artists (Nettleton 2020, 6). Historically, access to the field of art in Johannesburg was restricted to white artists and patrons, whose dominance socially and in museums and galleries allowed them to accumulate and reproduce cultural capital. As black artists were systematically excluded, their access to institutional and cultural validation was limited. Their exclusion instances Bourdieu's insight that fields are not neutral arenas but sites where power relations are reproduced through gatekeeping mechanisms and the control of legitimate cultural value.

4.3 Establishing Johannesburg's cultural infrastructure

During the early years of Johannesburg, art held little significance within the local community (Harmsen 1972, 13). Many artworks produced during this time were intended for export to England, serving as depictions of the so-called 'Barbaric South' (Harmsen 1972, 6). These works were largely created for documentary purposes rather than with commercial or aesthetic intent, and pieces that made their way into collections were often acquired through international channels. South African art within the Western tradition began to aspire to aesthetic value in the early twentieth century, with a particular focus on Modernist landscape paintings.

Two prominent institutions were established as early as the 1910s, with the Johannesburg Art Gallery (JAG) founded in 1910 as part of a colonial effort to shape Johannesburg into a 'civilised' and respectable city (McClure 2021). The gallery housed a fine art collection assembled by Lady Florence Phillips, wife of one of the most influential "Randlords,"[12] and British curator Hugh Lane. The collection focused mainly on modern British and French paintings, which set the tone for future acquisitions. Architecturally, the building was designed to embody the ideals of upper-middle-class Victorian and Edwardian respectability and wealth, symbolising the aspirations of the city's elite in a rapidly urbanising colonial outpost.

The non-commercial gallery, supported by wealthy Randlords, was part of a broader strategy to transform a transient mining camp into a lasting urban environment. Jeremy Foster (in McClure 2021, 34) argues that such projects aimed to establish a sense of permanence and cultural sophistication, replacing the provisional nature of the city's early mining history with a vision

[12] The Randlords were a small group of powerful capitalist mine-owners who made their fortunes exploiting deposits of gold and diamonds in South Africa using local labour. These mining magnates accumulated their wealth first in Kimberley in the 1870s and then in Johannesburg in the late 1880s (Stevenson 1997). The Randlords were not the first to mine South Africa's gold. See D. E. Miller and N. J. van der Merwe, "Early Metal Working in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Review of Recent Research," *Journal of African History,* 35, 1994: 1-36.

tailored to the tastes of the British elite. Symbolically, the JAG asserted the dominance of the British elite and mining magnates in the social and cultural milieu of Johannesburg (McClure 2021). By investing in fine art, the Randlords and colonial administrators transformed the economic capital derived from exploitative mining practices into cultural capital, helping to legitimise their societal position.

With its impressive Edwardian architecture and historical associations, JAG has rightly been regarded as a cultural institution deeply rooted in white, Eurocentric traditions. As Sassen (2001) observes, for many residents of the inner city and regular users of the adjacent Joubert Park, the gallery's architectural grandeur, the perceived value of its collection, and the scholarly discourse surrounding it, hold limited meaning. Its symbolic and material value has been undermined, not only by the enduring legacy of its exclusionary origins, but also by the effects of urban decay and systemic neglect.

Today, the area surrounding JAG has transformed into a bustling taxi hub within one of Johannesburg's most densely populated districts. While this transformation reflects the dynamic realities of urban change in post-apartheid Johannesburg, it has also led to withdrawal on the part of the gallery's traditional middle-class audience who, typically among the foremost patrons of gallery spaces are now deterred by concerns about safety and access (McGurk and Meyer 2025). As a result, JAG has been increasingly isolated from both public engagement and institutional support, leading to a significant erosion of its role within the city's broader field of cultural production.

According to McGurk and Meyer (2025), JAG's challenges stem not only from external conditions such as funding shortfalls and deteriorating infrastructure but also from internal structural and strategic deficiencies. The gallery suffers from outdated operational models, ineffective leadership, and an inability to adapt to the evolving demands of Johannesburg's rapidly changing cultural economy. As a conventional "white cube" space, JAG has struggled to reposition itself in relation to the diverse, emergent forms of cultural expression that characterise contemporary Johannesburg. Its inability to speak meaningfully to the needs and creative energies of the city's predominantly Black urban population has further undermined its relevance and impact.

These institutional failures must also be situated within a broader political and policy context. Post-apartheid cultural policy, while rhetorically committed to transformation and redress, has often lacked coherence, sustained funding, and strategic investment in public cultural infrastructure. McGurk and Meyer (2025) note that the city's leadership has consistently failed

to prioritise the arts in development planning, leading to the widespread neglect of institutions like JAG.

From the perspective of Bourdieu's theorisations, JAG's decline can be understood as part of a larger reconfiguration of symbolic power. Once a central node in the field of cultural production—possessing institutional legitimacy, historical prestige and curatorial authority—JAG has gradually lost symbolic capital. In contrast, commercial galleries and privately funded institutions situated in more accessible areas now play a dominant role in defining cultural value in Johannesburg. This shift marks a broader transition from state-supported cultural institutions to privately funded platforms as the primary negotiators of artistic legitimacy.

A notable example of this shift is the rise of the Everard Read Gallery. Established just a few years after JAG, Everard Read opened in the city centre in 1913 as Johannesburg's first commercial gallery. Initially located along a dusty street in what was then a booming mining town, it has since evolved into Africa's oldest and largest commercial gallery. After 50 years in the city centre, the gallery relocated to the prestigious suburb of Rosebank, where it continues to present modern and contemporary works by South African artists. With additional locations in Cape Town, Franschhoek, and London, Everard Read provides invaluable access for both local and international collectors. Many of these collectors are drawn by the gallery's longstanding reputation and presence, which offers reassurance as they build their art collections. Everard Read Gallery has a vast network that enables artists to gain significant social capital but also provides them with validation and recognition through its extensive cultural capital. The gallery still occupies an important place in the field of art, shaping the tastes of art collectors in South Africa. Everard Read represents the largest stable of South African artists and also has the most active gallery programme across its several locations (Corrigall 2019, 24).

4.4 Field of cultural production under apartheid (1948-1994)

The production and reception of art during the apartheid era were deeply influenced by the systemic inequalities of the time (Brown 2023). Within the field of South African art during this time, black artists, segregated into townships, were positioned at its margins and their art was shaped by their constrained circumstances. This marginal positioning was reinforced by apartheid's exclusionary policies, which restricted access to the forms of institutional cultural capital (such as art school education, gallery representation, and museum exhibitions) that were readily available to white artists. Their work was often categorised as craft, folk art, or "township art," relegating it to a lower cultural status and devaluing its intrinsic cultural capital

(Marschall 2001, 55). Black artists created under hugely difficult circumstances and had little outlet for their work, especially if it had political overtones.[13]

One of the first art centres in Johannesburg to disrupt this exclusionary field structure was the Polly Street Art Centre, which opened in 1952 under the guidance of Cecil Skotnes (1926–2009).[14] Skotnes was committed to nurturing talent and encouraging creativity, particularly in places where the apartheid government had deliberately excluded this possibility.[15] In Bourdieu's terms, Polly Street offered a parallel site of capital accumulation through both technical skills and symbolic recognition that could be converted into greater legitimacy in the broader field. According to the South African art historian, Esme Berman, the centre was "the launching-pad for the first large-scale venture of urban black South Africans into the arts" (Harmsen 1972, 37). The centre held informal classes for Black students who were mentored by established white artists. It produced a generation of independent black Modernist painters such as Sydney Kumalo, Lucky Sibiya, Ephraim Ngatane, Lucas Sithole and others.[16]

The constraints of the field also shaped audience reception. Aiden Walz, who ran a successful gallery in the 1960s and 1970s, noted the difficulty of attracting patrons to exhibitions of local work, as many preferred international artists (Brown 2023). This preference reflects the unequal distribution of symbolic capital within the field—where value was largely conferred by proximity to European art traditions—reinforcing the marginalisation of local artists.

Despite these challenges, Johannesburg saw the emergence of several significant galleries during this period, including Gallery 101 (founded in 1961), the Goodman Gallery (established by Linda Givon in 1966), and the Gertrude Posel Gallery (opened in 1972 and later renamed the Wits Art Museum). During this time, white artists had greater access to institutionalised cultural capital through formal education systems, such as art schools, which were largely inaccessible to Black South Africans due to apartheid policies. This educational privilege often translated into representation by major galleries, providing white artists with the symbolic capital necessary to gain validation and recognition.

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[13] Contemporary African Art. "Art Workshops," n.d. https://www.contemporary-african-art.com/art-workshops.html.
[14] Skotnes was a South African artist known for his paintings and incised wooden panels, striking woodblock prints, public murals, tapestry and sculptures. He pioneered a way of producing art that used earth pigments and indigenous wood. "Cecil Skotnes | Life and Work of Cecil Skotnes," n.d. http://cecilskotnes.com/.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid.

In 1982 the Triangle Arts Trust was founded by Sir Anthony Caro together with the British art collector and philanthropist Robert Loder. The Triangle Artist's Workshop was conceived to involve marginalised artists in alternative artistic approaches[17] and created opportunities for marginalised artists to bypass traditional gatekeeping. The workshops originated in New York, manifested as exchange programmes involving artists from London, New York and South Africa, and promoted a network of artist and artist-led workshops that provided critical support, especially for Black artists. The initiative was important for South African artists at the time because of the restrictions of UN-led cultural sanctions.[18] These workshops in essence facilitated transnational exchange without the need for formal galley representation. In Bourdieu's terms, such initiatives can be understood as creating subfields within the larger art field—spaces where new forms of capital could be generated and where the prevailing rules of the dominant field were actively contested.

One of the key figures in this initiative was David Koloane, who participated in the first of the Triangle workshops. In 1985, Koloane, together with artist, educator, and activist William "Bill" Ainslie (1934–1989) and others, founded the Thupelo Workshops in Johannesburg in response to the difficulties faced by black artists in South Africa during the state of emergency. The initiative received support from organisations such as the Johannesburg Art Foundation (JAF), the Federated Union of Black Arts (FUBA), and FUNDA community college in Soweto. These workshops offered artists a platform to explore and enhance their artistic skills (gaining cultural capital), while also allowing them to experiment and engage in collaborative creative processes and networking (gaining social capital). For many Black artists of the time, navigating these opportunities involved managing what Bourdieu (2000, 160) called a cleft habitus, a condition where the dispositions formed in one's original social context clashed with the demands of an unfamiliar or exclusionary field. Artists socialised in township environments, often facing economic precarity and racialised exclusion, had to adopt new modes of self-presentation, production, and interaction to succeed in elite art spaces, whether local galleries

[17] Peffers, Ruarc. "Contemporary Painters (Part I)," Peffers Fine Art, n.d., https://www.peffersart.com/exhibitions/23-contemporary-painters-part-i/.

[18] Between 1960 and the 1990s, South Africa remained under cultural sanctions aimed at pressuring the government to dismantle the apartheid system (Barnes 2008, 36). These sanctions led to diplomatic, cultural, and economic isolation, solidifying the apartheid government's pariah status on the global stage. International isolation paved the way for voluntary boycotts, in terms of which states severed diplomatic relations, ceased trade with South Africa, and denied passage to South African ships and aircraft. This social and cultural isolation was driven by civil society activists and supported by sympathetic governments. For instance, in 1965, an academic boycott was instigated, limiting South African scholars' access to research and international publication opportunities. In the 1980s, cultural sanctions were further reinforced by a UN resolution calling for foreign artists to avoid working with South Africa. As a result, white South African artists were effectively banned from touring internationally, while non-South African performers faced ostracism for performing in South Africa (Barnes 2008, 37).

or international workshops**.** Thupelo subsequently helped establish other arts organisations such as the Bag Factory in Johannesburg, which is today still supported internationally by the Triangle Arts Trust.

David Koloane has poignantly described the difficulties faced by Black artists under apartheid. In an article titled "Apartheid's Artistic Legacy," Juliet Highet quotes Koloane, who wrote in 1989: "How effective a role can an artist play within the community, in an environment devoid of any creative infrastructure such as museums, galleries, [and] institutions, where all such facilities are located in the affluent and privileged section of a racially divided society?" (Highet 2014, 85). This perspective highlights the structural imbalance in the field and the motivation for developing independent art spaces where artists could resist the limitations imposed by apartheid and create new forms of cultural expression outside the established, segregated art institutions. The creation of independent art spaces under apartheid was both a form of resistance to the dominant field's gatekeeping and a strategy for accumulating alternative forms of capital, laying a foundation for independent cultural production.

Despite these new art centres offering opportunities for artistic development, the Goodman Gallery's Linda Givon, in an interview with the *New York Times*, reflected that in the 1960s and 1970s many Johannesburg galleries celebrated "pretty scenes of life in the townships" to appease the white elite, who bought such works to demonstrate solidarity with the local community (Pollack 2003). However, much of the art emerging soon after, in the 1970s and 1980s, was confrontational and mobilised towards overtly political ends, criticising apartheid and promoting Black Consciousness. The focus of many galleries on international art during this time may have been an intentional shift to avoid engaging with local political realities, but its effect was inadvertently to reinforce the perception of local art's inferiority (Taylor 1996, 94).

The Goodman Gallery under Linda Givon demonstrates how an institutional actor can strategically accumulate symbolic capital by shifting the boundaries of the field. By championing politically engaged Black artists during apartheid, Givon not only contributed to their recognition and visibility but also positioned herself and the gallery as advocates of social change. In doing so, she challenged prevailing hierarchies while enhancing the gallery's cultural significance. This dual achievement of advancing the careers of marginalised artists while promoting the gallery's standing, illustrates the process of capital conversion, in which cultural capital gained through political engagement was transformed into symbolic capital. Givon's symbolic capital increased precisely because she located the gallery at the intersection of local political struggle and international recognition, redefining its position within the field.

4.5 Cultural reshaping in post-apartheid Johannesburg

In 1990 President F.W. de Klerk lifted the bans on the African National Congress, the Pan Africanist Congress, and the South African Communist Party, and announced the release of Nelson Mandela. By 1994, the cultural and sports boycott against South Africa had begun to break down as anti-apartheid organisations in the country looked forward to reconnecting with the global community. That same year, South Africa was liberated from half a century of apartheid through its first democratic elections. The end of apartheid in 1994 marked a significant turning point as legally enforced racial segregation was removed, allowing greater artistic freedom and expression. The sanctions against South Africa, a significant form of global condemnation and pressure aimed at dismantling the oppressive white regime, were lifted. The mid-1990s thus saw dramatic changes in the political landscape, and Archbishop Tutu's "Rainbow Nation" enjoyed brief political currency. The end of apartheid marked a significant reconfiguration of the art field in Johannesburg. This structured social space, comprising artists, galleries, institutions, collectors, critics, and audiences, was reshaped as new participants were able to enter the field and international engagement became possible. Yet, as with any field, the rules of the game and the distribution of capital did not shift overnight. Established institutions retained much of their economic and symbolic capital, continuing to define what counted as legitimate art and which artists could access the most prestigious platforms.

This period also marked the emergence of South Africa's contemporary art market. At the time, art fairs were non-existent, and the number of galleries and auction houses was limited. The market for international interest in contemporary African art was very limited, with a predominant focus on classical or "traditional" art forms. As Corrigall (2022, 42) notes, "opportunities for international recognition, such as participation in biennales, art fairs, major museum exhibitions, and collaborations with international galleries, were less accessible." This lack of access was at the heart of the challenges that South African artists faced in gaining recognition on the global stage during the early post-apartheid years.

Sabine Marschall (2001, 55) observes that in the 1990s a new politico-cultural emphasis was placed on the concept of pluralism, which made visible work by untrained black artists previously considered forms of craft or folk art. This was reflected in the inclusion of these works in permanent collections of public galleries, which, as state institutions, were eager to acknowledge their responsibility toward a more broadly conceived South African public (Marschall 2001, 55). Yet while these moves expanded the symbolic boundaries of the field, the

dominant definitions of artistic value, rooted in Eurocentric art-historical frameworks, remained largely intact.

The Standard Bank Art Gallery, established in 1990, illustrates the enduring power of economic and symbolic capital within the field. As a corporate-owned gallery, it has hosted exhibitions by South African masters such as Irma Stern, Gerard Sekoto and David Koloane, alongside retrospectives of contemporary artists like Gordon Froud, Roger Ballen, Blessing Ngobeni, and Lady Skollie. As part of a major financial institution, its corporate backing provides substantial economic capital that enables ambitious programming and international loans, further reinforcing its cultural capital as a tastemaker. In many ways, the Standard Bank Art Gallery fills a critical gap in the South African art landscape, functioning as a quasi-museum that preserves cultural history and promotes cultural development. It has played a pioneering role in introducing South Africans to twentieth-century European art, beginning with a Marc Chagall exhibition in 2000, followed by Joan Miró in 2002, Picasso in Africa in 2006, and Henri Matisse: Rhythm and Meaning in 2016.

Through sustained investment in cultural development, the gallery has become one of Johannesburg's primary institutions shaping artistic taste, controlling access, and profiling influential artists within the city's art field (Corrigall 2019). Its prestigious programming featuring renowned local and international artists generates cultural capital and positions the gallery as a mediator of what is considered worthy of recognition. Exhibiting here offers artists not only the prestige of association but also access to valuable social networks, including collectors and curators. However, the Standard Bank Art Gallery remains in large part accessible only to those who already possess significant cultural capital, reflecting the field's entrenched gatekeeping practices and the ways in which institutions reinforce traditional hierarchies and power structures in the art world. For independent or emerging artists without the resources to access such spaces, the Standard Bank Art Gallery's role as a gatekeeper of cultural and economic capital may feel exclusionary and demonstrative of the hierarchical nature of the art world.

In 1995, the first Johannesburg Biennale, *Africus*—directed by Lorna Ferguson, former curator of the Tatham Art Gallery in Pietermaritzburg, and Christopher Till, then Director of Culture for the transitional Metropolitan Chamber—further disrupted the local field by creating new points of access for artists without gallery representation. Ferguson conceived the idea for the biennale following a trip to Documenta in Kassel, aiming to place South Africa 'on the map' and showcase its emerging contemporary art scene for a global audience. The biennale took place in the first

year of South Africa's democracy and initiated a major shift in the Johannesburg art field, as artists – some of whom were previously marginalised – had their first experience of international contemporary art exposure. The biennale featured over 400 artists and ran for two months, showcasing paintings and sculptures from 54 countries. The biennale aimed to focus on the complexity of dealing with the uneven distribution of cultural resources in South Africa and the impact it has had on artists and their practices (Till 1995). It included community art exhibitions and other "non-contemporary" artistic manifestations in terms of the event's criteria of inclusivity and revisionism. Sabine Marschall highlights this vision, pointing out how *Africus* galvanised initiatives in local artistic production (Castellano 2017, 77). This period also witnessed a broader transformation in museum acquisition policies and staffing, with art institutions implementing affirmative action objectives, restructuring art history programmes, and reordering permanent collections to better reflect the nation's new democratic ideals (Marschall 1999, 122). The biennale temporarily redistributed symbolic capital by placing previously marginalised artists in direct contact with international curators, critics and audiences. For some, this meant navigating a cleft habitus—balancing dispositions formed in community-based or township contexts with the expectations of the global contemporary art circuit. While this exposure proved transformative for many, it also revealed how quickly the field can revert to dominant structures when sustained resources and institutional support are lacking.

Relying on the independence, creativity and ingenuity of its organisers, the biennale drew on vital connections between different locales and modes of production. Crucially, many participating artists had no gallery representation, enabling those previously excluded from international platforms to access global audiences for the first time. The event created rare opportunities for the arts community to encounter and engage with marginalised, undiscovered and independent artists, while allowing these artists to physically connect with a worldwide network. In doing so, the biennale helped redefine South African art for both local and international audiences and symbolised the country's political and cultural re-entry into the global arena during its first year of democracy (Becker and Enwezor 1998, 87).

The second Johannesburg Biennale in 1997, *Trade Routes: History and Geography*, curated by Okwui Enwezor, deepened these international connections. Held in Johannesburg and Cape Town from October 1997 to January 1998, it featured 160 artists from 63 countries. The festival attracted many international visitors, artists, curators, art historians and collectors who mingled with their South African counterparts while experiencing exhibitions that were considered rich in intellectual sophistication (Becker and Enwezor 1998, 87).

However, the biennale's significance must be understood in the context of the inequalities that continued to structure the South African art field in the early post-apartheid era. In an article in *New Nation* (1995), Mfundo Ndebele wrote that a cursory glance at the educational curriculum and the non-existence of art galleries and museums in the townships confirmed a glaring neglect of art and its importance by the former apartheid authorities (Ndebele 1995, 10). This history meant that many Black artists entered the post-apartheid field with significantly less institutional cultural capital – in the form of formal training, and access to exhibition spaces and professional networks – than their white counterparts. While the biennale's offered unpresented exposure, there were concerns that the events were isolated and perhaps irrelevant to what was happening in South Africa shortly after its democratisation. Ivor Powell, a specialist arts journalist for the *Mail and Guardian* at the time, criticised the second biennale by saying that it seemed "stuck within the problematics of the colonial instead of exploring the multifarious economic, political, and social issues being debated in post-apartheid South Africa" (Becker and Enwezor 1998, 87).

Moreover, the financial instability of both biennales (with the second reportedly closing early due to funding shortfalls faced by the City of Johannesburg) (Lossgott 2017, 223) alongside the absence of long-term institutional support, revealed the fragility of these platforms. These events briefly widened the field's boundaries but did not permanently alter the concentration of economic and symbolic capital in the hands of established galleries and institutions. The collapse of the biennale after 1997 left a vacuum that the commercial gallery sector was quick to fill.

By the 2000s, the Johannesburg art field was increasingly dominated by commercial galleries such as the Goodman and Stevenson galleries. These institutions occupy central positions in the field by leveraging and converting economic, cultural and symbolic capital using high-profile exhibitions, critical publications and international art fair participation to reinforce their prestige. As key gatekeepers, they not only shape the market but also influence the aesthetic norms and narratives that define legitimacy within the field. For artists without access to these institutions, especially independent or emerging practitioners, the field remains hierarchically structured, with mobility constrained by unequal access to capital.

4.6 The emergence of a commercial art scene

In the wake of South Africa's transition to democracy, the art field in Johannesburg underwent a significant period of redevelopment and growth. Galleries began to assert their prominence

within the art scene as institutions and alternative art spaces reorganised to reflect new cultural and political realities (Marschall 1999). According to Mary Corrigall's comprehensive survey *South African Art Market: Pricing and Patterns* (2019), the Johannesburg art scene today is largely driven by the commercial gallery sector.

Galleries like the Goodman Gallery and the Stevenson Gallery occupy central positions in this field by leveraging both economic and symbolic capital. The Goodman Gallery (founded in 1962) and the Stevenson Gallery, which opened in Johannesburg in 2008, are two key players who have accumulated substantial cultural and economic capital. These galleries not only dominate the commercial sector of the Johannesburg art scene but also influence cultural norms and tastes within the field. As already discussed, the Goodman Gallery has cultivated a reputation that has garnered significant symbolic capital in the art world. Similarly, the Stevenson Gallery places a strong emphasis on publications and exhibitions promoting the cultural capital of the artists it represents. Stevenson was one of the first galleries to show artists from elsewhere in Africa, extending the local dialogue about art and representation. Their publications are a vital means of enhancing the visibility and reputation of artists, increasing their standing among critics, curators, and international audiences, especially given the scarcity of critical writing and reviews in the Johannesburg field of art.

In Bourdieu's terms, the commercial gallery sector in Johannesburg functions as a space where economic and symbolic capital are constantly in negotiation. These galleries have not only shaped the commercial marketplace but also acted as key gatekeepers of artistic value, determining what is considered legitimate art and, by extension, who gains recognition and prominence in broader cultural discourse. Through their exhibitions, acquisitions, and participation in local and international art fairs, galleries have had a profound impact on the Johannesburg art scene, with artists seeking recognition and success often turning to these established institutions.

In Johannesburg, there exists a hierarchy of galleries based on several factors, including the number of galleries that form part of the structure and their global reach through either additional locations or international art fair involvement (Corrigall 2019, 49). The status of an art fair in which a gallery participates also influences its reputation, as does the stature of the artists in its stable. Corrigall and colleagues published a hierarchy of notable galleries in Johannesburg as it stood in 2019, before the global pandemic, based on points accumulated across various criteria, as illustrated below:

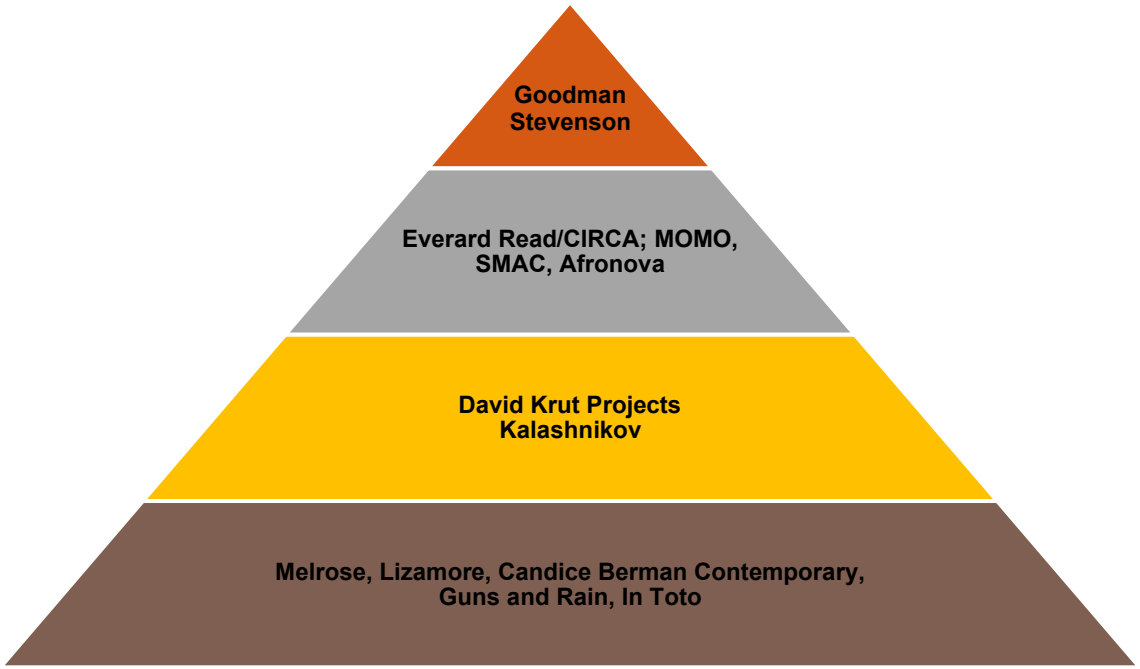


Figure 4.1. Hierarchy of galleries in Johannesburg (Corrigall 2019)

This hierarchy reflects the situation between the early 2000s – when privately owned galleries began to proliferate at the centre of the art world – and 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted in-person participation and the nature of global engagement in the art world.

4.6.1 Commercial galleries and art centres

The traditional role of galleries can be described as that of intermediaries committed to creating the symbolic and economic value of art (Bourdieu 1993a). Within the Johannesburg art field, where multiple participants compete for legitimacy, galleries occupy dominant positions. Galleries traditionally control access to visibility and undertake to set appropriate price levels for artworks to manage supply and demand as well as to build up trust in a fundamentally uncertain market. This is done by promoting artists using their accumulated network and creating demand among potential buyers. Galleries might strategically host events and exhibitions, attend studio visits, or have opening parties or collectors' dinners as a strategy to cultivate social capital, which can be mobilised to generate demand and invite investment. Because the value of artworks is socially constructed, these activities are central to producing the symbolic capital that marks both the artist and the gallery as legitimate (Habelsberger and Bhansing 2021, 55). Commercial galleries accumulate significant economic capital through the

sale of artworks, and symbolic capital through association with prominent artists whose careers they have helped promote.

In the early 2000s, the Johannesburg art field began to shift as young entrepreneurial art dealers and tastemakers sought to claim new positions. While established galleries continued to dominate, this period saw an expansion of the field with new entrants attempting to alter its dynamics. Nevertheless, according to Luvuyo Kakaza, a journalist for the *Sowetan Sunday World* newspaper, there was still a lingering sense that Black artists received little support from white critics and existing galleries (Kakaza 2001, 5). These artists often lacked the cultural capital associated with a fine arts university education or access to established networks, which could ease entry into the dominant positions in the field.

Several gallerists during this period leveraged their existing capital to strengthen their positions. Teresa Lizamore, for example, opened her gallery The Art Space in 2001, believing that there was "a need for private, commercial spaces in Johannesburg."[19] The gallery was rebranded as Lizamore and Associates in 2015, reflecting her desire to expand her engagement with artists beyond exhibitions and explore other ventures to support their careers (De Klerk 2014). Having served as the director of the Sasol Art Collection from 1982 to 2009 and also as an art advisor for Rand Merchant Bank, Lizamore made it her mission to strike a balance between making art accessible to those within the art community and corporate collectors, while also promoting both emerging and established artists. As a respected figure in the arts community, Lizamore leverages the social capital she accumulated as a curator for major corporations, transforming it into economic capital through the sale of artists' work to sustain her gallery and other ventures. Her extensive cultural capital has enabled her to support artists through exhibitions, mentorship programmes, and professional guidance.

Similarly, David Krut – whose background included experience in the London art scene – founded David Krut Publishing in 1997 and later David Krut Projects in 2002. His publishing ventures, such as the TAXI Art Books series and a pioneering publication on William Kentridge in CD-ROM format, generated cultural capital for South African artists by elevating their legitimacy in both local and international contexts**.** Before that, he had published an edition by respected British Pop artist Joe Tilson.[20] In 2002 he opened David Krut Projects in Parkwood,

[19] Artthrob. n.d. https://www.artthrob.co.za/01apr/listings-gauteng.html
[20] David Krut Projects. "The Story of Oak Mantra by Joe Tilson," April 28, 2023. Accessed January 12, 2025. https://davidkrutprojects.com/67179/the-story-of-oak-mantra-by-joe-tilson.

which included a print workshop, bookstore and showroom. This development allowed artists to produce editions through which they could earn economic capital but also gain cultural capital through interactions with well-known artists and production and distribution in the art world.

Neighbouring David Krut Projects was Warren Siebrits's Modern and Contemporary Art Gallery, which opened in 2002 with a debut exhibition "States of Emergence," which traced 30 years of socially critical and politically charged art. Although no longer operating, the gallery played a crucial role in establishing an art scene capable of critically engaging with social and political themes. With his background as an appraiser of paintings and books at Sotheby's in Johannesburg, Siebrits used his social capital and networks to establish himself as a key intermediary between artists and collectors. He eventually became an independent art dealer and consultant for private collectors and corporate and museum collections (Heckl 2002). Siebrits's archive of historical works and his publications with his partner Lunetta Bartz extended their influence in preserving and shaping the narrative of South African contemporary art.

Not all developments during this period conformed to the traditional gallery model. The Premises Gallery, established in 2002 in Newtown as an experimental and non-traditional space, played a significant role in the evolution of the Johannesburg art scene. Launched by the Trinity Session[21] and directed by independent artists Stephen Hobbs and Marcus Neustetter, Premises Gallery positioned itself as an experimental subfield within the broader Johannesburg art field. Its curatorial strategy sought to draw artists from historically marginalised areas such as Alexandra and Soweto into a contemporary, urban regeneration context (Farber 2004, 15). Artist and co-founder of the Trinity Session, Stephen Hobbs, has characterised the focus of the gallery as a combination of research, curatorial activity and sourcing art in unconventional ways and through commercial ventures (in Farber 2004, 15). The gallery intended to source art for group shows from artists operating in the Alexandra and Soweto townships, which would have been instrumental in realising an inclusive, contemporary, multi-purpose cultural space (Farber 2004, 15). By doing so, it offered alternative routes for artists whose habitus—shaped outside elite art institutions—did not align with the expectations of the dominant commercial field.

[21] The Trinity Session is an artists' collective, and consultancy based between Johannesburg and Vienna, Austria, specialising in public art installation, multimedia-performances and placemaking though art (https://thetrinitysession.com/).

Independent dealers like Monna Mokoena, who opened Gallery Momo in Parktown North in 2002, also worked to alter the dynamics of the existing art field structures in Johannesburg.[22] By self-funding and representing a diverse roster of contemporary artists, Mokoena demonstrated how economic capital could be mobilised outside of established white-owned institutions to challenge the field's hierarchies.

By the late 2000s, other significant actors emerged. SMAC Gallery (originally Stellenbosch Modern and Contemporary) was founded by Baylon Sandri in 2007. The gallery was originally committed to showing works by historically underrepresented artists in South Africa but later changed its focus to uplifting contemporary artists in Southern Africa. It wasn't until 2016 that Sandri launched an outpost in Johannesburg which ran until 2024. Its rapid rise, cemented by participation in more than 10 prestigious events each year, demonstrates how global engagement functions as a generator of symbolic capital, consolidating a gallery's position in the local field (Rabb 2024).

In 2009, the CIRCA building was developed alongside the Everard Read Gallery as part of its contemporary offering. The development was supported by Rand Merchant Bank and dedicated to merging contemporary art exhibitions with human technology and scientific installations. The creation of CIRCA strategically revived the contributions of the Everard Read Gallery to reposition the gallery in the field of art using economic capital, incorporating science and technology and opening up new opportunities to attract a larger, more diverse audience.

The establishment of Arts on Main in Maboneng in 2010 was a significant development in bringing art back into the inner city and reactivating and repurposing urban spaces that were long underutilised. The centre included the studio of the internationally renowned South African artist William Kentridge,[23] the David Krut Workshop, art bookstore and gallery, as well as other important commercial galleries, such as Seippel Gallery, Goodman Gallery and Goethe on Main, which allowed artists to live, work and display their work in the city centre (Buys 2008; Ngwenya 2009, 10). The location in the inner city made art production and consumption

[22] https://www.gallerymomo.com/About

[23] William Kentridge (born 1955) is a South African artist renowned for his prints, drawings, and animated films, especially a series of hand-drawn animated works from the 1990s that tackle complex social, political, and historical issues. His art frequently explores themes related to apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa, as well as broader human experiences. Kentridge's work has gained international acclaim, with exhibitions at prestigious institutions such as the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, Tate Modern in London, and Centre Pompidou in Paris. Considered one of South Africa's most influential artists, his works have also contributed significantly to academic discussions on postcolonialism, history, and memory.

in Johannesburg more accessible to artists whose habitus was marked by cultural diversity, particularly those from historically marginalised communities.

Other galleries and initiatives that emerged during this time include the Candice Berman Gallery in 2013, which specialises in South African expressionist artists, and Guns and Rain, founded by anthropologist, communications specialist and entrepreneur Julie Taylor in 2014. Guns and Rain was one of the first online galleries in Africa, operating online only until a physical space was established in Parkhurst, Johannesburg, in 2018. The gallery was established to address the under-representation of African artists on the international art scene and works in a combination of exclusive and collaborative agreements with artists.[24] Taylor has said that the primary reason for starting her online gallery was her frustration with the absence and inaccessibility of art in the digital space and the ineffectiveness of galleries in responding to inquiries made online.[25] For many artists, engaging with such platforms required negotiating a cleft habitus by balancing the slower, relationship-based norms of the physical gallery world with the self-promotion, immediacy and visibility metrics of digital engagement.

Leaning into new technologies, TMWR Gallery, founded in 2019 by Ann Roberts, was one of the first galleries in Johannesburg to operate exclusively at the intersection of art and technology by offering virtual reality exhibitions and experiences. Audiences thus engaged with art in immersive ways, transcending traditional viewing experiences. Since then, the field of art in Johannesburg has further expanded to include spaces such as the Usurpa Gallery, which is recognised as the first gallery in South Africa to focus on non-fungible tokens (NFTs). Usurpa describes itself as a premier Web 3 digital platform, leading the charge in championing digital assets as timeless investments within the fine art arena. Building on the intersections of art and technology, innovation and commercialism, this development shows that the Johannesburg art scene is constantly looking for new ways to interact with new forms of contemporary art.

Across these developments, the Johannesburg art field since the early 2000s has been shaped by competition between established actors and new entrants seeking to redefine the rules of the game. Access to and conversion among different forms of capital remain central to an artist's or gallery's ability to secure a position. While new spaces and platforms have expanded

[24] Guns & Rain. "Home Page - Guns & Rain," November 14, 2024. https://gunsandrain.com/.
[25] Julie Taylor, Interview with author, Online. May 2023.

opportunities, they have not fully dismantled the hierarchical structures of the field, which continue to privilege those whose habitus aligns with its dominant norms.

4.6.2 Art fairs

The emergence of art fairs in Johannesburg in 2008 is connected with the increasing corporatisation of the field of art in Johannesburg, prompted in part by the lack of public funding for the arts (Labuschagne 2010). The art fair can be considered a key site in the field of cultural production, a structured space where agents compete for legitimacy and art and artists can gain prominence, become potentially profitable, and assume a highly social dimension (Thornton 2008, xiv). Traditionally, art fairs operate as concentrated trading grounds for artworks, offering galleries opportunities to expand their economic capital through sales, build symbolic capital through visibility and association, and cultivate social capital by connecting with collectors, curators, critics and other influential actors (Labuschagne 2010, 7). They are considered critical points of connectivity between local and international art audiences, and have the ability to provide direct access to collectors and a buying audience as well as opportunities for wider social engagement in the field of art. In Bourdieu's terms, the art fair can be classified as a traditional epicentre for building social connections and acquiring social capital. Art fairs in theory offer galleries and the artists exhibiting with those galleries economic sustainability as they create such a wide platform for economic support of the arts. They also afford galleries and artists visibility, plus opportunities to build large social networks and establish connections with other influential agents in the field of art such as curators, critics, collectors and writers.

The first edition of the Joburg Art Fair, created by local production company ArtLogic under the direction of Ross Douglas, opened its doors in 2008, the first privately funded commercial art fair in Africa (Labuschagne 2010). This fair was different from biennales or other large-scale exhibitions in that its focus was entirely commercial, the aim being to create a commercial market for South African art (Buys 2008, 10). The South African market was at the time relatively small and unfamiliar with contemporary African art. The art fair can therefore be interpreted as a field-restructuring intervention, creating a platform where artists, galleries and collectors can acquire new forms of economic and symbolic capital. The fair created a platform where participants – artists, collectors, and galleries – could gain visibility and recognition, thus adding to their symbolic capital within the art world. The inclusion of international collectors and art market professionals was a deliberate move to introduce a broader, more global *field* of art, connecting local producers and consumers with international buyers. In 2010, Cobi

Labuschagne, a former director at Artlogic, wrote extensively about this event, exploring the cultural and social politics of art fairs and their place in South Africa in her thesis "Reflections on the Contemporary Moment in South Africa: Art Publics, Art Money, and Art Objects at the Joburg Art Fair 2008–2009." Labuschagne considers the Joburg Art Fair's role in shaping a new public culture in South Africa. The Joburg art fair signalled a shift from politically charged exhibitions rooted in national identity to a focus on consumption, lifestyle, and the commercialisation of art. By showcasing a wide range of contemporary works, the fair enhanced the symbolic capital of participating artists and galleries, facilitating their legitimation within both the local and international art fields. Labuschagne (2010, 333) argued that the merit of the fair lay in the sheer scale and diversity of the contemporary works on display. By showcasing a wide range of works, the fair not only promoted local artists but also elevated their status within the broader art world, building their symbolic capital and facilitating their legitimisation in the international art field. The Joburg Art Fair was considered an essential platform for the mutual introduction of audiences and artists. However, the rise of digital platforms has in recent years altered modes of access to local and international audiences by expanding the ways in which artists can engage with their audiences and challenging the autonomy of the art fair.

The launch of the Turbine Art Fair in 2013 further diversified the Johannesburg art field. Marketed as South Africa's first accessible and affordable art fair, Turbine lowered the threshold for participation by removing strict selection criteria, allowing a wider range of exhibitors—including secondary market dealers, print studios, artist organisations, and collectives—to present work (Corrigall 2019). Instead, it positioned itself as a platform for showcasing both established and emerging artists in an immersive, accessible, and inclusive environment. The fair provided space for a variety of galleries, secondary market dealers, print studios, artist organisations, collectives, and project spaces to exhibit emerging and mid-career artists, while engaging with both new and established collectors and audiences.

Respected artist and curator Prof. Karel Nel endorsed the fair, stating that "Turbine is the important nursery enabling young artists to enter the art market",[26] suggesting that the event provides a space for artists to begin building economic and social capital. In effect, the fair managed to disrupt some of the gatekeeping mechanisms that typically control access to the dominant positions in the field. However, it still did not provide a model for independent artists to exhibit without the mediation of or affiliation to a gallery.

[26]Turbine Art Fair. n.d. "About Turbine Art Fair." Accessed March 7, 2025 at https://turbineartfair.co.za/about

In 2019, ArtLogic, which had successfully managed 12 editions of the FNB Joburg Art Fair, transferred ownership to its former director Mandla Sibeko, establishing it as a wholly black-owned institution and renaming it Art Joburg (Hlalethwa 2019). Under Sibeko's leadership, the fair adopted a new model characterised as "a hybrid curatorial and commercial approach." This involved the inclusion of a selective roster of established galleries such as Blank Projects, Gallery Momo, Goodman Gallery, Stevenson Gallery, and SMAC, alongside an incubator space for emerging galleries and hybrid art spaces (Hlalethwa 2019). The selection process for the fair became more exclusive. Whereas galleries could previously apply to the fair, they were now selected by a committee[27] for the main section of the fair, branded Gallery HUB. There are other subsections of the fair such as Gallery Lab, MAX and the ETC. section, where galleries and projects or workshop spaces are invited to participate on a proposal basis.[28] Many of the galleries and spaces which had previously featured at the fair were no longer present due to this new model of participation.

In the same year, Johannesburg welcomed a new initiative called Latitudes, founded by partners Lucy MacGarry, Roberta Coci, Makgati Molebatsi, Nokwazi Zimu, and Anthea Buys. The founders believed that the art fair landscape required transformation (Hlalethwa, 2019). Among other interventions, Latitudes significantly altered the art fair model by including independent artists who were not exclusively affiliated with galleries. In 2022, Latitudes received corporate sponsorship from Rand Merchant Bank and relocated to Shepstone Gardens, in Mountain View in the southern part of Johannesburg. The venue is close to Orange Grove, a residential area situated to the southeast of the city. This art fair breaks with the tradition of the white-cube aesthetics of conventional art fairs by not being located in major business hubs like Rosebank or Sandton. It offers a unique indoor-outdoor experience, creating a more relaxed and accessible atmosphere for visitors.

The fair has evolved from showcasing individual works or small groups of works by independent artists to featuring a major exhibition called INDEX – a curated section displaying a larger number of works by independent artists. By 2025, Latitudes will have a dedicated section for independent artists to present solo exhibitions, marking a significant advance in the art fair landscape.

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[27] According to Art Joburg, the criteria for the central section are in line with international standards of art fairs worldwide and are set in order to align the fair and its galleries with international discourse and ensure the responsible patronage of artists. Art Joburg, "FNB Art Joburg's FAQs," September 4, 2024, https://artjoburg.com/faq/.
[28] Ibid.

The evolution of Johannesburg's art fairs illustrates the interplay among capital accumulation, field positioning, and the shifting rules of access. Fairs like Art Joburg maintain the centrality of established galleries in the field's power structure, while platforms like Turbine and Latitudes open partial spaces for newcomers and independent practitioners. However, such openings continue to exist within the broader logics of the market-oriented field, where visibility and legitimacy are often contingent on the ability to convert economic, cultural and social resources into enduring symbolic capital.

While the commercial art sector in Johannesburg has thrived through dynamic galleries, fairs, and the increasing intersection of art with fields like science and technology, the state of historical museums and institutions in the city tells a different story. While vibrant commercial enterprises encourage support and engagement through innovation and change, traditional institutions and museums, such as the Johannesburg Art Gallery, find themselves at a crossroads. These institutions are struggling to remain relevant and are at risk of failing to preserve the cultural history of the arts in Johannesburg due to the collapse of their infrastructure and a lack of support and funding.

4.7 The state of non-commercial and historical art museums in Johannesburg

Although Johannesburg is South Africa's largest city and is often considered a cultural hub alongside Cape Town, it lacks a robust network of public art museums typically found in cities of similar stature. The absence of a dense and well-maintained museum infrastructure in Johannesburg is a significant issue and reshapes the field of cultural production by weakening traditional public institutions that preserve heritage, legitimise practices, and provide platforms for engagement with historical and contemporary art. Ault (2002, 3) argues that what becomes history is often determined by what is archived, and museums are institutions fundamental to this process. The absence of these institutions poses challenges not only for artists but also for the broader public, as it limits access to platforms that engage with historical art and narrative and reduces opportunities for artists to position their work within the broader temporal and cultural context necessary for building symbolic capital.

The Johannesburg Art Gallery (JAG), which houses one of the largest and most valuable collections of art in Africa, is a poignant example of this issue. Despite its historical significance, the museum has been in a state of decline for years, suffering from neglect and a lack of necessary funding for restoration and other purposes. Recent reports underscore the urgent

need for funding to preserve the gallery's structure and priceless collection. The building itself is deteriorating, and the artworks are improperly stored, with some already damaged and many at risk. The neglect of JAG highlights a larger issue within Johannesburg's art field – without robust public institutions, the city's artistic heritage and cultural history are under threat (Haffajee 2024). This situation exacerbates the challenges faced by independent artists, who often rely on museums as platforms for engagement with art history, archives, and audiences. Without robust public institutions to confer legitimacy, the accumulation and conversion of cultural capital into symbolic capital becomes far more difficult.

Efforts to address this gap in the city's art infrastructure have emerged in the form of university-affiliated institutions such as Wits Art Museum (WAM), one of the few functioning public museums in Johannesburg. Established in 1972, WAM is committed to collecting, preserving, and exhibiting both historical and contemporary works, with a particular focus on African art. The museum houses a significant collection of over 13,000 African artworks, alongside growing archives of prominent South African artists, such as Judith Mason, Walter Battiss, Robert Hodgins, and Gerhard Sekoto. It features the Jack Ginsberg Centre for Book Arts, which holds over 3,000 artists' books and an extensive library of South African artists' monographs.[29] Offering an active exhibition and education programme, WAM thus serves as an essential resource for artists, researchers, and the public. However, the location of the Wits Art Museum in Braamfontein presents challenges, as it is somewhat distant from key art spaces and commercial galleries in other parts of Johannesburg. Its limited accessibility, limits its ability to fully integrate with broader art networks, restricting opportunities to build social capital through interaction with diverse audiences. Despite these challenges, WAM continues to be an important cultural institution in a city where these are in short supply.

More recently, institutions like the Joburg Contemporary Art Foundation (JCAF), founded in 2013 by Adrian Enthoven, Phuthuma Nhleko, and Gordon Schachat, have sought to fill some of the gaps left by traditional museum institutions. JCAF is a non-profit organisation, not a museum or a gallery but rather a hybrid institution focused on knowledge production and engagement with contemporary art. Its purpose is to globalise South African contemporary art and reimagine the role of African art institutions in Johannesburg, creating a space for dialogue about contemporary African art. By positioning itself as a site of global engagement and cultural

[29] The University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, "About Us - Wits University," n.d., https://www.wits.ac.za/wam/about-us/.

exchange, JCAF plays a crucial role in reshaping Johannesburg's art field, contributing to the development of cultural capital through its programming, exhibitions, and initiatives.

The absence of a strong museum infrastructure in Johannesburg suggests that the city's habitus (to use Pierre Bourdieu's concept) deprioritises cultural preservation, primarily due to insufficient funding and institutional support. This lack of official commitment to preserving art history and maintaining public art museums leaves participants in the field dependent on their own resources, often having to rely on commercial galleries or independent, alternative spaces. As a result, the commercial gallery system dominates the field of art in Johannesburg, reinforcing existing power dynamics and limiting opportunities for artists who are not represented by galleries or who cannot access these more formalised structures of recognition. The rise of institutions like JCAF, alongside the ongoing work of WAM, signals a shift in the Johannesburg art field. Such institutions represent a transformation in how cultural capital is cultivated and exchanged in the field. Unlike traditional museums, which focus primarily on preservation, these newer hybrid institutions place significant emphasis on knowledge production, international collaboration, and contemporary discourse. In this sense, they strive to create spaces where artists can engage with contemporary global art movements while also contributing to the local cultural landscape.[30]

Although hybrid institutions like JCAF are essential in introducing new opportunities for artists, they also point to the continuing weaknesses in Johannesburg's art infrastructure. The city's lack of well-maintained and active public art museums suggests that the art field remains in a state of flux, with significant gaps in how art history is preserved and how contemporary art practices are contextualised. The rise of alternative spaces for art exhibition and engagement may offer new routes for social capital building, but they cannot fully replace the need for robust, publicly funded art museums dedicated to the preservation and exhibition of both historical and contemporary works.

Ultimately, the decline of public art museums in Johannesburg underscores a crucial issue: without institutional support and infrastructure, the city's artistic heritage is at risk, and independent artists are left to navigate an art field dominated by commercial interests. The establishment of hybrid institutions like JCAF and the continued work of WAM offer hopeful

[30] Africa, Art, and Art Africa. "Joburg Contemporary Art Foundation (JCAF): The Hybrid Institution Educating Audiences Through an Art-Historical Lens – ART AFRICA Magazine." ART AFRICA Magazine: Contemporary Art from Africa and the Diaspora, Painting, Sculpture, Writing (blog), June 3, 2021. https://artafricamagazine.org/joburg-contemporary-art-foundation-jcaf-the-hybrid-institution-educating-audiences-through-an-art-historical-lens/#:~:text=The%20Mission%20and%20Purpose%20of,a%20new%20contemporary%20African%20art.

examples of how this art field can evolve, but a more comprehensive approach is needed to ensure that the city's cultural legacy is preserved for future generations. The lack of public art institutions highlights the ongoing challenge for artists and cultural practitioners in Johannesburg wanting to build a sustainable and equitable art field – one that can both preserve history and support new artistic practices.

The decline of public museums coincides with the weakening of another pillar of the art field: critical arts writing. Historically, publications such as *Rapport, Mail & Guardian*, *Art South Africa*, *The Star*, and *City Press*[31] acted as mediators of legitimacy, using critical reviews to position artists' work within cultural narratives and increase their symbolic capital. For decades, these publications served as key platforms for critical arts writing, providing in-depth reviews, essays and commentary that fostered public discourse on the arts. The printed format not only offered a tangible, archival record of cultural production but also enabled broad physical distribution, reaching audiences who might not be engaging with digital media. The erosion of art criticism and its infrastructure reduces the field's capacity for reflective discourse and public debate, leaving artists—especially emerging and independent practitioners—to self-promote in the absence of professional critics. This shift alters the distribution of capital within the field, as institutional validation becomes increasingly concentrated in the commercial sector, while public and critical engagement diminish.

Ultimately, the decline of Johannesburg's public art museums and critical media undermines the city's ability to sustain an equitable and dynamic art field. While institutions like WAM and JCAF offer important counterbalances by fostering cultural exchange and building networks, they cannot fully replace the structural role of publicly funded museums in preserving heritage and legitimising artistic practices. Without substantial investment in these spaces, the city's art field risks becoming even more dependent on commercial logics, narrowing the pathways through which artists can accumulate and convert the various forms of capital necessary for long-term recognition and sustainability.

[31] After a period of decline, in 2024, Media24 announced that printed editions of *City Press*, *Daily Sun*, *Rapport*, and *Beeld* would no longer be produced, and that Media24 would be shifting their focus to digital only (Maggs, 2024). This shift spelled the end of an era for South African print journalism. The decline of print thus signals not only a shift in media consumption but also the loss of a vital space for sustained, thoughtful engagement with the arts.

4.8 Alternatives to gaining cultural capital through auction houses and art awards

Auction houses and art awards represent significant opportunities for artists, functioning alongside the evolving landscape of galleries and cultural institutions. Auction houses have played an important role in bringing work by South African artists into the public arena while providing a platform for them to gain cultural capital and establish or increase the economic value of their work. Auction houses tend to be perceived as more accessible and catering to a broader audience. Their transparent pricing and publicly available results contrast with galleries, which often maintain a culture of secrecy regarding the valuation of artworks.

The South African auction market has historically been dominated by two major players: Stephen Welz and Co. (formerly Sotheby Parke Bernet from 1969 to 1987) and Strauss and Co., which was established in 2008 by Conrad Strauss and Elizabeth Bradley, under the guidance of the late Stephen Welz, a prominent fine art expert and auctioneer. In 2016, Aspire Art Auctions emerged in response to perceived shortcomings in the auction industry, particularly regarding diversity and representation.

While auction houses focus primarily on facilitating the buying and selling of art through competitive bidding, they have also adapted to include private sales and some initiatives that directly support independent artists. For instance, Strauss and Co. launched initiatives in 2022 to assist artists without formal representation in the primary market. According to Wilhelm van Rensburg, senior curator and fine art specialist at Strauss and Co., these initiatives, which include exhibitions and discussions, aim to establish provenance and increase artists' visibility.[32]

Art awards have also played an essential role in supporting artists by providing financial incentives, visibility, and platforms for cultural dialogue within the Johannesburg art field. With the decline of institutional and government funding for the arts – such as the National Arts Council's withdrawal of support for young artists in 2003 – art competitions have emerged as an option for artists to gain social capital by connecting to local and international networks. Corporate-sponsored awards, such as the Sasol New Signatures Art Competition, established in the 1960s, and the Absa L'Atelier Award, launched in 1986, offer not only financial support but also international residency programmes. These programmes enable artists to expand their

[32] Interview with Wilhelm van Rensburg, 17 November 2023.

education, gain global experience, and build broader networks. Prominent South African artists, including Diane Victor, Penny Siopis, William Kentridge, Colbert Mashile, Marco Cianfanelli, and Conrad Botes are among those who have benefitted from such awards, increasing their status in the South African art world. Since 2004, the addition of the Gerard Sekoto Award to the Absa L'Atelier Competition aims to foster inclusivity and support emerging artists between the ages of 25 and 35. The award is made possible by the Embassy of France in South Africa, the French Institute in South Africa in partnership with ABSA, and the National Association for the Visual Arts (SANAVA).

4.9 The rise of independent art spaces

4.9.1 Collective artist studio spaces

In Johannesburg, independent or alternative art spaces have played an important role because of their ability to create new platforms and inspire new practices in the arts. According to Malatjie (2013, 327), Johannesburg art practitioners and members of the art community typically encounter artworks either in commercial galleries or state-funded museums. There are, however, growing numbers of alternative art spaces that exist alongside the galleries and museums that provide an opportunity for a variety of art narratives, promoting diversity in art (Malatjie 2013, 327). Artist-run spaces were introduced to counter the representation of artists by commercial galleries and empower artists to dictate how their art is represented and displayed (Malatjie 2013, 327).

The first known independent art spaces appeared in New York in the 1960s and were considered places of voluntary association for artists (Vorobeva 2021, 418). These were spaces created for artists who were not a neat fit with the commercial framework. In the Johannesburg context, independent art spaces function on the same premise while responding to the unique socio-political context and needs of Johannesburg-based artists. Many of the well-known independent spaces help to create a bridge between the galleries and art fairs situated in the Northern Suburbs and artists who live and work on the periphery and in the city centre. By connecting artists in peripheral areas or the city centre to the established hubs of the Northern Suburbs, Johannesburg's independent spaces act as bridges between subfields, helping artists lacking certain forms of institutional cultural capital to access broader networks and audiences. A number of these locations and their contribution to the art field will be discussed.

The phrase "alternative art space" is used to designate spaces that challenge the conventional "white cube" model typically employed by commercial galleries and other exhibition arenas.

The first extensive theoretical exploration of the white cube can be found in an influential three-part essay published by Brian O'Doherty in 1976, titled *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*. Here, O'Doherty argues that the term *white cube* refers to a mode of display that had long ago achieved dominance in both museums and commercial galleries (in Cain, 2017). In *The Global White Cube* (2014) Elana Filipovic argues that the white cube represents far more than an important physical space. She suggests that the modern art world's white cube circumscribes not only a mode of presentation, but also an attitude toward art and an aura or halo of indelibility on whatever is displayed inside it. Filipovic makes the important point that the white cube became a cipher for institutional assertiveness, fortifying the ultimate tautology that an artwork belongs there because it is there (Filipovic 2014). Working within the dynamics of the white cube, dealers and galleries in the modern world have enjoyed a multi-faceted function in the creation of value in the art world. As historical tastemakers and gatekeepers, they interpret and manipulate the artist's cultural significance whilst analysing the art market to strategically place their stable of artists within the commercial and symbolic value system (Rodner and Thomson 2013, 6). By contrast, alternative spaces reject or modify these conventions, opening space for artists whose habitus—shaped by community-based practice, political engagement, or experimental methods—may not align with the expectations of the commercial art market.

As the white cube model may entail restrictive ideologies that some artists would reject, alternative spaces may offer artists the freedom to work outside of certain institutional limitations (Malatjie 2013, 327). Ault (2002,4) argues that terms such as alternative, marginal and oppositional have historically been viewed as problematic by art world participants, as they reinforce a hierarchical perspective that construes the art field as a system (Ault 2002, 4). Labelling a space "alternative" implies a concentric hierarchy which situates mainstream commercial galleries at the centre. In a recent survey of over 1500 independent art spaces worldwide, Vorobeva (2022, 416) suggests that independent art spaces can be described as non-profit, artist-run spaces that strive to bring together local and international cultures. They offer public programming and platforms as well as spaces for artists to work collectively, rather than in isolation at a secluded studio, thereby affording them the opportunity to learn and develop by being amongst other artists. This rings true for many of the independent art spaces in Johannesburg.

After the Polly Street Art Centre, one of the earliest inclusive independent art spaces in Johannesburg, came the Johannesburg Art Foundation, which was founded as a non-governmental organisation by Bill Ainslie in 1964. The core idea of this space was to create

networks of people, artists, writers and benefactors, all coming together to give exposure to the artists.[33]

Artist Proof Studio (APS) was founded in 1991 by Kim Berman and Nhlanhla Xaba as a community-driven print workshop aiming to provide talented young and unrepresented artists with printmaking skills that would contribute to their professional careers. Situated in Newtown, the city's cultural hub at the time, the non-profit organisation was founded at a time when South Africa faced the national challenge of building a new democracy. APS came together as a "free space" to imagine and discover what a democratic future could look like through printmaking (Berman 2024). To achieve this goal, APS was characterised by community engagement and 'democratic' art education, partnering with corporate and private sponsors, businesses and individuals who supported creativity and the arts in South Africa and wanted to be part of the new South Africa (Berman 2024, 390). Decorative flower and European impressionist posters were thus replaced by affordable handmade linocuts, monoprints and collagraphs made by young black artists. This is significant as one of the first opportunities for young black artists to earn an income from their work.

Similarly, the Bag Factory was founded by artist, curator and teacher David Koloane and Robert Loder in 1991 as a non-profit organisation in which artists could be nurtured and create work in a freely accessible and culturally diverse environment. At the time of its inception, the space provided studios for predominantly Black artists who had little or no access to platforms and resources that could further mould their careers.[34] The building consists of 16 artist's studios and workshop spaces and has become a hub for cultural exchange, playing an important role in cultivating and promoting South African artists. Its successful and well-known alumni include artists such as William Kentridge, Penny Siopis, Deborah Bell, and Pat Mautloa. Lebogang Mabusela and, significantly, Phumulani Ntuli, who were selected to participate in this research, are recent former residents at the Bag Factory, with Ntuli listing his first major exhibition at the premises in Fordsburg. The Bag Factory is a space that allows artists to connect to local and international audiences through educational programming, open studio days and exhibitions where curators have the opportunity to engage with artists. The Bag Factory connects artists to international networks through hosting international artist and residency programmes, and also through its affiliation with the Triangle network, which enables artists to expand their

[33] Bill Ainslie Studios, Johannesburg (South African History Online n.d.)
[34] The Bag Factory (South African History Online n.d.)

network, engaging with international curators and art scenes, and collaborating with peers globally.[35] These residencies often involve partnerships with international institutions and art organisations, enabling artists to exhibit abroad or participate in international exhibitions and fairs, gaining cultural and symbolic capital through these processes.

August House, the largest collective studio space in Johannesburg, was established in 2006 by Bie Venter and Maria Svane. Located in Doornfontein, the building houses a mix of tenants, including artists and other creatives, and some manufacturers (Gurney 2017, 152). What sets it apart is its focus on private studio spaces for artists, a model that has been emulated by other collective studio spaces such as Ellis House and Transwerke Studios, situated in the Constitution Hill district. Positioned in an area less frequented by the general public, August House appeals to artists and creatives because of the expansive spaces available for production and the community fostered through its network of practitioners (Gurney 2017, 152). Diane Victor, an artist quoted by Gurney, describes the building as "a little life system" (2017, 152) where artists live and work, enjoy a support network and learn from others. Initially created to provide working spaces for artists, August House has evolved its programming to focus on supporting and developing artists and the broader art industry.

A neighbouring site is Victoria Yards in Lorenztville, a mixed-use space in Johannesburg that serves as a gathering point for artists and artisans, promoting a sense of communal development. Located in the inner city, this area was transformed in 2015 from brick warehouse buildings into a vibrant centre that now hosts artists, especially those who sculpt, affordable workshops, an urban farm, monthly markets, and live events like music performances and poetry readings. The space has become a key part of the city's creative ecosystem, drawing people from diverse backgrounds and providing opportunities for collaboration and cultural exchange.

More recently, Asisebenze Art Atelier opened in Newtown, another part of Johannesburg's inner city. This atelier offers its members not only studio spaces but also housing, materials, and professional guidance in the arts. With a resident curator, the space hosts regular exhibitions and an active public programme designed to invite people into the heart of Johannesburg's

[35] Bag Factory Artists' Studios, "About Us - Bag Factory," Bag Factory, September 5, 2024, https://www.bagfactoryart.org.za/about-us/.

creative community and connect them with the artists working there. It is a space that encourages both artistic growth and public interaction.

In addition to these larger initiatives, there are smaller independent artist collectives scattered around the city, such as Bevan De Wet, Phumulani Ntuli, Tamara Osso, and Bev Butkow, who operate from 11 Alexander Street in Fordsburg, and Andrew Kayser and Jake Singer, who share a space in Selby, a well-known industrial area in Johannesburg. These smaller collectives are vital to the city's art scene, offering an intimate, community-driven approach to creative practice.

The spatial relationship among these collective art spaces reflects the dynamic and evolving field of art in Johannesburg, particularly within its inner-city areas. These smaller spaces challenge the dominance of the more traditional, capital-driven art field by affording artists opportunities to navigate the art world in less hierarchy-governed ways. They provide platforms for artists to gain cultural capital within the local art scene while also fostering connections and accumulating symbolic capital, creating opportunities, and contributing to a more inclusive art field. Such spaces are becoming increasingly important to the arts community in Johannesburg, as the recognition grows that that economic and symbolic capital can emerge through the interactions they foster and are no longer solely in the gift of traditional galleries or institutions.

Within these collective environments, artists are able to exchange resources, ideas, and contacts, which can open doors to exhibitions, fairs, and other platforms to expand their reputation and visibility. The spaces encourage new methods of making, learning, and trading, allowing artists to engage with emerging technologies while still honouring traditional craftsmanship and expertise (Moloto 2023). Situated in the inner city, they are designed to support and nurture creative talent from surrounding communities, offering opportunities to artists who have no access to the more commercialised art world dominated by galleries and art fairs. In doing so, they broaden Johannesburg's artistic landscape, expanding it beyond its traditional, elite confines. The artists associated with them discover new ways of enhancing their social and cultural capital through encounters, collaborations, and exhibitions.

4.9.2 Artist-run galleries

The idea of collective studio spaces, where artists can exhibit their work independently and invite collectors and others to visit their location, has evolved further and been formalised with

the emergence of artist-run galleries. In the mid-2010s, Johannesburg saw several such spaces open, all seeking to diversify the existing gallery landscape and fill perceived gaps in the local art ecosystem.

Formalising their activities permits artists to create autonomous environments to foster new forms of expression and community engagement. Notable among these initiatives is Kalashnikovv Gallery, founded in 2013 by M.J. Turpin and Matthew Dowdle. Kalashnikovv was conceived as a direct challenge to the symbolic authority of the traditional "white cube" gallery model, which was perceived as conservative and disconnected from younger audiences. Before establishing a permanent location, from 2004 Turpin and Dowdle organised large-scale group exhibitions under the rubric of The Untitled Gallery. Their desire to host exhibitions was galvanised by the perception that bigger galleries in Johannesburg at the time were not showing works that resonated with a young audience. Eventually, Kalashnikovv Gallery opened in Braamfontein. Turpin and Dowdle aimed to create a hybrid space that could accommodate a more inclusive approach to art that values alternative artistic practices, street art and the inner city's public engagement with contemporary art.[36] Since its inception, Kalashnikovv has relocated to Parkhurst and expanded to a second location in Cape Town. This expansion demonstrates how an initially oppositional position in the field can, through the accumulation of symbolic and social capital, transition toward more central and institutionally recognised positions without necessarily abandoning its founding ethos.

Similarly, No End Contemporary was established in 2015 by Maaike Bakker, Jayne Crawshay-Hall and Dalene Victor Meyer, with a focus on showcasing contemporary works in various media, including illustration, curatorial exhibitions, and conceptual two- and three-dimensional art. Originally located in Linden, Johannesburg, No End temporarily closed its gallery operations during the COVID-19 lockdown. However, it reopened in a new location in Parkhurst in June 2024, signalling its continuing commitment to supporting diverse contemporary art practices.

In 2018, Banele Khoza founded BKhz, a space initially intended to serve as his personal studio and platform. Shortly after, he started showing the work of other artists, seeing a need for a gallery that highlights emerging artists and puts their interests first. BKhz focuses on creating experiential exhibitions that transform the gallery space to reflect the practices of individual

[36] Kalashnikovv Gallery. "ArtJoburg Interview With MJ and Matthew — Kalashnikovv Gallery," n.d. https://kalashnikovv.com/artjoburg-interview-mj-murray.

artists, bringing audiences into the artists' worlds. The gallery prioritises the vision and needs of the artists it represents, fostering an inclusive and artist-centred approach. This approach not only amplifies the artists' cultural capital but also challenges the traditional hierarchy in which commercial imperatives often outweigh artists' creative autonomy. By participating in major local and international art fairs, BKhz has increased its symbolic capital and visibility within the broader South African and international fields, demonstrating how an artist-run initiative can navigate between an independent ethos and the demands of the global art market.

Taken together, these artist-run galleries illustrate how alternative and independent actors can strategically position themselves within the art field, using autonomy, location, and curatorial approach to differentiate themselves from dominant positions in the field. While their founding visions often emerge in opposition to the established commercial system, their participation in key field events such as art fairs enables them to convert social and cultural capital into symbolic capital, gaining legitimacy while maintaining varying degrees of independence.

4.10 Conclusion

The chapter began by exploring the historical context that has significantly shaped the art scene in Johannesburg. During the apartheid era, the field was constrained by systemic limitations and international influences, resulting in an art world that was both disengaged and culturally isolated. While many galleries focused on appealing to white South Africans and showcasing works by international artists, others sought ways to navigate around the social and political restrictions. Through these efforts, important foundations were laid for artists to subvert traditional, dominant art structures, fostering the growth of independent and collaborative art spaces.

Following the end of apartheid and the gradual restructuring of cultural institutions, several galleries and art spaces in Johannesburg grew to prominence. Their historical ability to provide local (and in some cases international) exposure has played a key role in advancing the careers of artists in South Africa. By offering platforms for exhibitions, international exposure, and participation in art fairs, these institutions helped position Johannesburg's artists within the global art world. Commercial galleries such as the Goodman, Stevenson and Kalashnikovv, David Krut Projects, and Guns and Rain, among other galleries, play a crucial role in supporting artists while also contributing to the city's cultural infrastructure. Galleries inevitably have limitations, however, primarily due to the necessity of maintaining a profitable income. As a result, they often base their decisions on which artists to feature according to their commercial viability,

leading to a selective process that can be isolating for artists. Given the scarcity of opportunities, there is a clear need for alternative spaces and practices through which artists can independently gain recognition, income, and position within the art world.

Chapter 5: The impact of the digital space and social media on the art world

5.1 Introduction

The expansion of creative industries, and specifically the art world, into the digital space has provided artists with new opportunities to enhance the visibility of their practices, distribute their artworks, and grow their audiences, all without relying on mediation from traditional institutions such as galleries (non-commercial or commercial), art fairs, museums and public collections. In the current Information Age, in which digital communication is the backbone of society and the economy (Mandarano et al. 2010, 125), it can be argued that such advances have fundamentally reshaped art world practices. The field of art, once dominated by a privileged, well-travelled art elite (Atkins 2014; Soro,2023), is now accessible to millions globally.

This shift not only enables artists to connect with broader audiences but also facilitates engagement with institutional structures and curators, providing access to networks and opportunities that may previously have been out of reach. Through the use of platforms in the digital space, artists have devised ways of accumulating social and, in some cases, economic capital. In Johannesburg, the early 2000s saw galleries and artists begin to leverage the internet, establishing a presence beyond their physical space and local environments. Initially, the internet (Web 1.0) served as a research tool and static sales platform, documenting past or current exhibitions. The online presence of galleries functioned mainly as a marketing tool, complementing their physical activities or archiving past exhibitions (Williamson, 1999; Grieg, 2011). However, many galleries were hesitant fully to integrate their operations into the digital realm (Habelsberger and Bhansing 2021, 48), and conventional gallery practices remained largely intact (Van Miegroet et al. 2019, 6; Habelsberger and Bhansing 2021, 57). The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic forced a shift, as in-person interaction was severely curtailed. Artists worldwide turned to the internet to stay connected with their peers and reach a broader audience, including art buyers, collaborators, and cultural influencers. This digital shift also allowed individuals to follow and engage with galleries, museums, and other art world institutions, such as auction houses, which became more active and visible online.

This chapter begins by tracing the evolution of the internet and examining the digital space, using Bourdieu's concept of the field. The development of the internet, from its inception to its current form, has profoundly influenced how social and professional interactions occur, including those within the art world. By applying Bourdieu's theoretical framework, I will explore how the digital space functions as a field with its own structures, rules, and forms of

capital. I will also examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Johannesburg's art scene, focusing on how the global crisis accelerated the adoption of digital platforms by artists and other participants. This shift created new opportunities for artists to negotiate their positions within the art field, and led to a reconfiguration of perceptions regarding art world practices and hierarchies.

A central focus will be on how digital platforms and social media have enabled artists to reshape their engagement with Johannesburg's art field, particularly through the accumulation of digital social capital. I will analyse the mechanisms by which artists accrue capital in the digital realm, how these practices influence their habitus, and the extent to which digital social capital can be converted into other forms of capital – such as economic or cultural capital – within the traditional, physical art world.

5.2 The evolution of the digital space

The digital space has undergone profound transformation over the past few decades, from static information sharing in what is now known as Web 1.0 to the interactive and decentralised landscape of Web 3.0. Each iteration of the internet has brought new ways of connecting, engaging and sharing information across global networks. As the digital space continues to evolve it brings both opportunities and challenges for users, including in the arts. This section explores the evolution of the digital space from Web 1.0 to Web 3.0 and examines the benefits, challenges, and limitations that accompany the changing nature of the internet.

5.2.1 Foundations of the internet

The digital age began with advancements in communication technology during the late 1960s and 1970s, which made it possible to produce and distribute information more easily. This, in turn, paved the way for the emergence of new forms of organisation, including a global economy driven by information technology networks (Castells 1996; Mandarano et al. 2010, 25). Initially, the internet was a project of information scientists working under the resources of the American military, specifically through the Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) (Logan 2016, 238). The network was designed as a distribution system, where each computer was used for its communication and distribution capabilities. With the development of standardised protocols, global inter-computer communication became possible through existing telephone networks. The ARPANET project was launched in 1969, an experimental computer network that enabled the transition of textual messages between colleagues working at physically distant

computer systems (Logan 2016, 239). During this time, email was one of the earliest networking tools, intended to enable systems operators and computer scientists to facilitate database and other resource sharing (Abbate 2000, 107-108). This network gave rise to the subsequent assembly of the Internet in the 1980s, creating a new conduit for instantly transmitting information and communicating (Abbate 2000, 1; Harrison and Barthel 2009, 156). Computing technology had evolved from isolated calculating devices into sophisticated communication tools (Abbate 2000, 1), a pivotal shift in the function of computers from basic data processing to facilitating complex interactions across networks. As the internet evolved, it became a revolutionary platform that enabled the simultaneous transmission of information across vast distances, effectively transcending geographical boundaries (Abbate 2000, 1).

The progress of the internet has been characterised by increasing exchanges of data, facilitated by emerging digital technologies (Lewis et al. 2024, 3). While the internet reflects decades of development by numerous individuals and organisations, Tim Berners-Lee's vision of a hyperlinked information system was central to creating the functional infrastructure that became the World Wide Web (WWW) in 1989—an innovation that fundamentally reshaped our understanding of digital connectivity. The protocols for the WWW were developed by Berners-Lee while working at the European Organisation for Nuclear Research known as CERN – a universal system that would allow scientists across the globe easily to share research, data, and findings, overcoming the limitations of previous information-sharing methods.

Although Berners-Lee did not initially or intentionally consider artists in his design, his ideas have since transformed the production, transmission, and reception of visual arts by revolutionising societal interactions (Respini 2018, 13). Berners-Lee's proposal for an information management system reimagined its functionality. The WWW, made more accessible to the general public by the introduction of the Mosaic web browser in 1993, produced a hyperlinked system of documents through which one could present visual and textual information. It could also connect users to a powerful range of information retrieval and analytic capabilities (Harrison and Barthel 2009, 156).

5.2.2 Web 1.0: The 'read-only' web

Web 1.0, often referred to as the "read-only" web, was characterised by static, text-based web pages with limited multimedia elements. Early web pages served primarily as platforms for information dissemination, offering content without interactive features, making users largely passive consumers. Web 1.0 relied on server file systems and lacked the more sophisticated

database management systems that would later shape the web. By 1994, the introduction of the user-friendly Netscape Navigator browser marked a turning point, with businesses beginning to adopt Web 1.0 as a tool. Initially, it was seen as a luxury for specific functions, such as distributing technical product information or company software (Logan 2016, 24). Netscape Navigator was faster and more feature-rich than its predecessor, Mosaic, making it better suited for commercial use. It introduced key innovations like cookies,[37] frames,[38] and JavaScript,[39] which played a crucial role in the development of the modern commercial web.

In this early phase of the internet, the accumulation of capital, in Bourdieu's terms, was largely restricted to the transfer and accumulation of knowledge, as user interaction was minimal. However, in 1995, Larry Page and Sergey Brin, working from their dorm rooms at Stanford University, revolutionised the web with their search engine, which used links to determine the importance of individual pages across the World Wide Web, a platform they called Google.[40] The search engine rapidly gained traction, drawing attention from both the academic community and Silicon Valley investors. In August 1998, after an investment from Sun co-founder Andy Bechtolsheim, Google Inc. was officially founded.[41] The significance of the search engine in Web 1.0 lay not only in its technological innovation but also in its potential to organise and make information universally accessible, laying the groundwork for a more interactive and capital-generating digital ecosystem.

This era marked the advent of internet applications for personal computers, though most users were still limited to accessing and searching for information, without the ability to edit or contribute content. Research into the usability of Web 1.0 in the art world shows that galleries began using websites during this phase as virtual portfolios to showcase exhibitions and archives (Chibalashvili 2024, 105). The first virtual exhibitions were launched by museums in the 1990s, utilising Web 1.0's capabilities, such as HTML, mark-up language, frames, and static images (Povroznik 2020,3). These virtual exhibitions allowed museums to present collections

[37] "Cookies" are files downloaded by Internet browsers when they visit certain sites. They collect data about users' paths, which can be used to trace users' profiles and offer them personalised ads (Figueiredo and Bolãno 2017, 27).
[38] HTML frames are a way of dividing a web page into multiple sections or windows, each displaying different content. This technique allows web designers to display multiple pieces of content on a single page without needing to reload or navigate away from the current page.
[39] JavaScript is a high-level programming language commonly used in web development to create interactive and dynamic elements on websites.
[40] Originally called 'Backrub', the name 'Google' was a playful reference to the mathematical term for the number 1 followed by 100 zeros, symbolizing the vast scale of information the company aimed to organize. This name aptly reflected Larry Page and Sergey Brin's mission "to organise the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful." How We Started and Where We Are Today – Google. n.d., https://about.google/our-story/.
[41] Ibid.

freed, as it were, of the limitations of time, distance, and space (Widjono 2020, 93). However, it was only later that artists and galleries – especially in the Johannesburg art scene – began leveraging these technologies to connect with global audiences through the more interactive web services that would come to define Web 2.0.

As the internet expanded, the need to address information overload led to the development of recommender systems based on collaborative filtering, introduced in the early to mid-1990s. These systems built predictive models to estimate how much users would like various items (Konstan and Riedl 2012, 101). In the context of recommender systems, algorithms – defined as sets of rules – are used to analyse user data, preferences, and behaviours to predict and suggest relevant content, products, or services. These algorithms provide personalised recommendations based on patterns found in the data. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, algorithms – as encoded procedures for transforming input data into a desired output – began significantly to impact the web and its users (Gillespie 2014, 167). They would later play a central role in mediating user activity in the development of the interactive platforms that would define Web 2.0.

5.2.3. Web 2.0: The interactive web

As the internet evolved into a more interactive, dynamic and participatory space, the digital field expanded to include a wider range of users. The term "Web 2.0" was first introduced by Darci DiNucci in 1999 and later popularised by Tim O'Reilly and Dale Dougherty at the inaugural Web 2.0 Conference in 2004 (O'Reilly 2005). Rather than being a new invention, Web 2.0 represented an evolution of the principles and infrastructure of Web 1.0, enhanced by interactive, computer-mediated technologies (Rudman and Bruwer 2016, 136). Unlike its static predecessor, Web 2.0 introduced a dynamic and participatory user experience that enabled the development of the first social networking sites (SNSs)[42] such as Six Degrees (1997) and My Space (2003). In 2004, Mark Zuckerberg founded Facebook, and large existing companies like Amazon (1994) and Google (1998) started adapting their platforms to enable users to publish, comment, like, and upload content. These early sites laid the groundwork for social networking that would become popular in the mid-2000s with platforms like Twitter (2006), Instagram (2010) and TikTok (2016).

[42] Social networking sites are web-based services that allow individuals to (a) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (b) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (c) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system (Boyd and Ellison 2010).

The key features of Web 2.0 can be divided into three main categories:

1. Community and social interaction, where users could view, create, edit, and share content collaboratively.
2. Technological adaptations, which enhanced hardware and software compatibility across multiple devices and platforms.
3. Cloud technologies, which gave way to networked software and resources available on demand.

This era enabled richer interactions between users and servers, fostering engaging webpage displays and applications. Harrison and Barthel (2013, 157) note that Web 2.0 empowered users with limited technical skills to actively engage in content creation and sharing. This democratisation of content led to a sense of ownership and community, laying the foundation for today's interconnected digital landscape.

Interconnectivity has been significantly shaped by the widespread use of social media platforms. 'Social media' has been defined as a group of internet-based applications allowing users to selectively interact with each other through the creation and exchange of user-generated content (Kaplan and Haenlein 2009). Social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter and, particularly, Instagram, which revolutionised visual content distribution, enable users to connect by creating personal information profiles, inviting friends and colleagues to have access to those profiles and sending emails and messages. Social media platforms are now the most widely used sources of information in the world, presumably because they enhance the information-sharing process by allowing consumers to engage in real time with each other. The fact that users could now interact and participate in the digital space created a level playing field where users could exploit the digital space in more meaningful ways. Artists and other creators gained access to larger audiences. Informal and formal social networks serve as vital conduits for knowledge creation and sharing among individuals and organisations. New technologies, especially new applications of the internet, provide efficient ways to make connections outside of one's personal network. The decrease in reliance on traditional social capital alleviated a major constraint on traditionally disadvantaged artists and showed the potential for users to accumulate social and symbolic capital through their engagement in the digital space.

However, as Omar and Ondimu (2024, 96) observe, while the social media have enhanced global connectivity and cultural exchange, they have also raised concerns about the depth of personal

connections in digital spaces, as well as privacy issues associated with large corporations owning and controlling user-uploaded content and implementing advertising models and algorithms that control the information being disseminated. These concerns, alongside the ownership of content and user data in a centralised web, would be taken into consideration with the further development of Web 3.0.

5.2.4 Web 3.0: The decentralised web

Web 3.0 offers digital transformation strategies which assume a variety of forms including the use of advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence, blockchain[43] and privacy protection (Yao and Sida 2024, 17). Web 3.0 has the potential to transform online interactions and empower users in ways previously unimaginable, focusing on autonomy, transparency, and distributed power. These shifts may, in turn, influence practices and perspectives in physical fields such as the art world.

Web 3.0 has made significant changes in the way the internet operates, offering a solution to the concerns of corporate ownership and privacy through decentralisation. The new paradigm emphasises data ownership, giving artists more control over their personal information, pricing and secondary markets, and aims to create a more equitable and transparent digital space. By decentralising control, Web 3.0 seeks to empower individuals and protect user privacy, marking a significant shift in the evolution of the web (Shen et al. 2024). While these aspirations have been positive and the digital space has made it easier to attribute ownership of artworks through blockchain technologies, it has also added new layers of complexity relating to copyright challenges, facilitating unauthorised reproductions and alterations (Kong et al. 2024, 3).

5.2.4 Challenges and limitations

The integration of digital technology into the art world has been transformative, but it also presents significant challenges and concerns. While the connectivity and accessibility of the internet offer many benefits, they have also raised issues concerning copyright, authenticity, and reproducibility (Kong et al. 2024, 3). The ease with which artists and audiences can

[43] The term "blockchain" generally refers to an innovative decentralised infrastructure for managing information across a distributed system. It maintains a secure ledger of transactions or system changes using a chained data structure, and relies on consensus algorithms to verify, store, and update data across the network (Sun et al. 2023).

disseminate, share, and replicate artworks poses substantial intellectual property concerns (Kong et al. 2024; Ntuli 2024). As policies governing the production, distribution, and ownership of digital works continue to evolve, it is increasingly important for artists to take measures to safeguard their work.

In addition, the notion of authenticity and reproduction in the digital era is under constant scrutiny. The question of accessibility to content in the digital space is as challenging as it is invigorating. Users can capture, reuse or reproduce any artist's work within the digital space, often without the original source being attributed. There is also the potential to fabricate personas or present versions of reality that can influence and alter perceptions through the selective sharing of information. Determining the provenance and legitimacy of art can be a complex but necessary endeavour in the digital space.

As the digital space becomes increasingly central to the field of art, artists who can navigate this arena effectively can accumulate new forms of capital, particularly digital social capital. But the shift is also creating friction within the field, as artists, collectors, and institutions struggle to define and uphold norms respecting the reputation of artists and the value of their work. In the traditional art world, cultural capital is often accrued through institutional recognition – exhibitions in reputable galleries and validation by critics and curators – which in turn creates trust among collectors and other stakeholders. In contrast, the digital space, with its proliferation of artworks often lacking proper attribution or provenance, challenges the legitimacy of artists and the perceived value of their work.

5.3 Applying Bourdieu's field theory to the digital space

Drawing on Bourdieu's spatial metaphor of field as a social arena or network of configurations of social positions – where these positions and their interrelations are determined by the distribution of economic, social, and cultural capital (Ignatow and Robinson 2017, 951) – it is necessary to clarify the nature of the digital space. Bourdieu suggests that a field is a boundaried, relatively autonomous domain of activity that responds to rules of functioning and institutions that are specific to the relations amongst agents. He formally defines a field as:

> a structured social space, a field of forces, a force field. It contains people who dominate and people who are dominated. Constant, permanent relationships of inequality operate inside this space, which at the same time becomes a space in which various actors struggle for the transformation or preservation of the field. All the

> individuals in this universe bring to the competition all the (relative) power at their disposal. It is this power that defines their position in the field and, as a result, their strategies. (Bourdieu 1998, 40-41)

The digital space can similarly be considered a structured social space where individuals, corporations, and organisations interact with various levels of power and influence. It can similarly be understood as a semi-autonomous space composed of multiple subfields, often referred to as platforms, each with its own rules and norms (Thompson, 2010, 72). The "field of forces" in the digital space is shaped by users, social media platforms, technology companies, governments, content creators and algorithms. Positions in the field are influenced by the effort that participants in the digital space invest in the platforms, which enable them to gain influence and access opportunities. The digital space can be investigated using Bourdieu's method of field analysis, as was outlined in Chapter 1.

To understand the position of the digital space in relation to the field of power answers an important question about the sustainability of artistic practice in the field of art generally. What has emerged is a conflictive dynamic between the 'rules of the game' in traditional field structures and the digital field of art. The digital space represents an environment of free access and transparency, where artists play an active role in controlling the dissemination of information, creating a more inclusive and open space for engagement in the art world. This disrupts existing art world traditions of institutional gatekeeping, which rely on limited access to information.

Although the digital space is often considered disembodied, Serin and Irak (2022, 3) argue that the practices of everyday life, combined with the use of digital space, represent an overlapping and reconstructed structure of spaces. This suggests that the digital space functions as an overlay to the physical one rather than as a separate, disconnected entity. While the digital space transcends geographical boundaries, it remains integral to the mediation of everyday life (Serin and Irak 2022, 3). The interrelation of digital and physical spaces is significant. Even though users compete for positioning, influence and capital within the digital space, the translation or exchange of the acquired capital ultimately occurs in the physical world.

The digital space provides artists with enhanced visibility, enabling them to curate their own exhibitions or promote their work through personal profiles – an opportunity not often available in the physical art world. Traditionally, visibility has largely depended on whether galleries have had the capacity and desire to showcase an artist's work. However, freedom in

the digital realm comes with the challenge of algorithmic control, which determines what users see based on their interests, which are in turn inferred from the data collected from their online activities. Social media platforms, in particular, combine user tracking with real-time data gathering, offering a personalised experience in terms of both content and advertising (Figueiredo and Bolãno 2017, 29).

The power to control the flow of content has shifted from large media companies to social media platforms, which use algorithms to mediate individuals' interactions with others and with mass media. While these companies position themselves as objective and claim that algorithms act as neutral intermediaries for content producers and advertisers, Pasquale[44] (2015) argues that algorithms, in reality, make controversial, value-laden decisions. The platforms present constructed images of the world while claiming to merely reflect it. Pasquale (2015) makes the further point that while tech giants like Google and Facebook know a great deal about their users, individuals have very little insight into how these algorithms operate.

Moreover, while institutions in the physical art world have traditionally held the power to determine cultural value and shape consumer taste, the digital sphere significantly redistributes this power to the audience. In online contexts, value is often measured through engagement metrics such as likes, comments, and shares, foregrounding visibility and responsiveness over institutional endorsement. There is thus a marked distinction between how artwork is valued within digital spaces and how it is assessed by traditional cultural institutions. Highbrow taste, typically associated with elite spaces such as galleries and museums, privileges experiences of transcendence and treats artworks as conduits for intellectual and emotional engagement—often reinforcing aspirational moral and aesthetic hierarchies (Van Eijck 2001, 1168).

In contrast, taste formation in the digital sphere tends to be shaped by broad popular appeal, frequently characterised by immediacy, accessibility and short-term interaction. Lizardo (2006, 782), for example, argues that "the primary concerns of popular taste are fun and pleasure." This view, grounded in Bourdieu's framework that distinguishes between 'legitimate' and 'popular' cultural capital, positions digital engagement as primarily oriented toward affective gratification rather than critical or contemplative depth. However, this distinction risks

[44] Frank Pasquale is Professor of Law at Cornell Tech and Cornell Law School. He is an expert on the law of artificial intelligence (AI), algorithms, and machine learning. "Frank Pasquale - Cornell Law School," Cornell Law School, July 5, 2023, https://www.lawschool.cornell.edu/faculty-research/faculty-directory/frank-pasquale/.

underrating the diversity of digital cultural practices. While entertainment and immediacy are undeniably central features of online engagement, digital platforms can also foster aesthetic discourse, political expression, and identity performance that complicate the assumption that popular taste is inherently superficial or apolitical.

This more nuanced view is echoed by Barker (2000, 69), who offers a critical counterpoint to Lizardo by arguing that the production, content, and reception of popular culture are in fact embedded in the class, gender, and cultural politics of the societies in which they circulate. While Lizardo emphasises the emotional appeal of popular culture, Barker highlights its role in negotiating power. Popular culture, Barker argues, is never culturally hollow; rather, it is the terrain where cultural hegemony is either secured or contested.

In the digital space, where content circulates widely and at speed, the popular becomes a key site for ideological negotiation. Even seemingly 'lowbrow' or entertainment-focused content can be a symbolic arena to contest cultural politics, whether by reinforcing dominant stereotypes or by offering platforms for resistance, alternative worldviews, and marginalised voices. In this sense, the "fun and pleasure" of digital culture can also operate as vehicles for critique, subversion, and a reimagining of the social order.

These tensions are also visible in the Johannesburg art scene, where the field is shaped by localised dynamics such as the availability of galleries, access to the networks of collectors and gallery-goers, and the structures of the regional art market. These conditions directly influence how artists can accumulate cultural and social capital. The dynamics of the physical field often constrain artists through geographic and institutional limitations, restricting exposure and access to those already embedded within the dominant structures. For example, artists without the means to travel internationally may find themselves excluded from global circuits of recognition and exchange.

In contrast, the digital space offers a more fluid and potentially democratising field, a bridge that allows artists to transcend geographic constraints, engage global audiences, and participate in international exhibitions and markets. On social media platforms, the size and visibility of an artist's network function as tangible indicators of social capital, which can increase their desirability to curators, collectors and collaborators. The performative visibility enabled by the digital space reshapes how value is produced and recognised, providing alternative pathways for artists operating outside of dominant institutional frameworks.

While the digital space has its broader 'rules of the game,' it also consists of various subfields described as platforms with their own values and regulatory principles (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 17) governing the type of access users have and what content is disseminated. For instance, Facebook prioritises connections with friends, family and (to a lesser extent) colleagues with similar interests, while also being useful for promoting events and gauging audience attendance. Instagram prioritises visual and influencer content that requires users to build followers and produce consistent quality content to remain relevant. With multiple platforms to choose from, users frequently engage with multiple social media platforms simultaneously. It is common for social media users, including artists, to treat social media as "integrative environments of communicative opportunities, " exploiting the differences among the platforms to manage various relationships (Tandoc et al. 2018, 22).

The way artists operate in the digital space also impacts the broader economic field for artists. They are now able to promote and sell their work freely through social media platforms without having to pay commissions to platform hosts. Additionally, alternative income models have emerged, offering artists new forms of economic capital, as defined by Bourdieu. Artists can launch crowdfunding platforms[45] such as Kickstarter and Patreon, reaching out to the public to raise funds in exchange for exclusive content or early access to their artworks. In return for financial support or subscriptions, artists offer their audience unique benefits. This model has the potential to provide more stable and consistent financial backing, offering a sustainable income stream that allows artists to continue developing their careers[46].

The second focus of field analysis is to consider the objective structure of the relations occupied by participants or institutions in the field who compete for authority. The digital space is occupied by field participants who enjoy some crossover with the physical field of art. The physical art field remains the ultimate power structure to which activities in the digital space must eventually defer. For example, artists who participate in social media in various ways seek recognition, visibility, opportunity and sustainability through the sale of their works, most of this being manifested in the physical field of art. Yet the audience (or other users) in the digital

[45] "Crowdfunding" as a contemporary expression the contemporary predominantly associated with the internet and online platforms and refers to calls to a broad public for the provision of financial resources to support the development of a specific, novel good or service, from a perspective of cultural economics (Handke and Chiesa 2022:, 51). The first crowdfunding platform was ArtistShare, subsequently followed by platforms like Kickstarter, Patreon and GoFundMe.

[46] Further research could investigate specific data pointing to the levels of income that artists generate through platforms like Kickstarter and Patreon, as well as the extent to which substantial earnings are dependent on an artist's pre-existing visibility or follower base on social media. This would provide a clearer understanding of the sustainability and accessibility of this funding model across different levels of artistic recognition.

space are essential in determining the value of interaction in the field of art through their engagement with the content uploaded to various social media platforms. As the digital space is based on open-access principles, the audience's engagement is what attributes value and creates taste.

In traditional art world structures, galleries, curators and institutions would mediate the relationships between artist networks and their visibility in exhibition spaces. In the digital space, algorithms take on a similar role as mediators. Social media platforms employ a range of algorithms, and these are subject to constant change.

In the context of the use of digital space by independent artists in Johannesburg, the role of algorithms becomes particularly significant. Independent artists, often working outside traditional galleries and institutions, must negotiate these algorithmic structures to gain visibility and reach wider audiences. While traditional art world mediators like galleries or curators would typically help artists gain exposure, in the digital realm, algorithms control this role. Algorithmic control is based on two key principles. The first is machine learning, which tailors content according to users' past behaviour, so that independent artists' visibility is influenced by their audience's previous engagement with similar content (Lim 2023, 186). This creates a cycle in terms of which, in order to remain visible, artists have continuously to adapt their work or their online presence to align with trends or audience preferences. Kartik and Mishra (2022, 513) suggest that if artists are not proactive on social media, members of the public are quickly moved by the algorithm on to other pages that offer similar content.

The second principle relates to the sorting of data, which shows up on a user's feed based on relevancy as opposed to chronology (Lim 2023, 186). Posts are not displayed in the order in which they are posted but are instead prioritised according to the platform's algorithmic assessment of what is likely to capture a user's attention. This can be both beneficial and challenging for artists. On one hand, the algorithm can push content to a broader audience, creating opportunities for international engagement to which independent artists might not otherwise have access. On the other hand, the same system is influenced by trends and emotional interactions from other users, which may cause content to become less visible if it does not align with these components of engagement.

As the digital field thrives on active engagement, the notion of artists developing a digital habitus becomes central if they are successfully to use digital platforms. The digital habitus can be described as the continuous use of and engagement with digital technologies. This requires

being comfortable with digital technologies (Colbert et al. 2016) since the digital habitus entails the intimate use of information communications technologies (ITC) (Robinson 2009) and a set of dispositions developed gradually through online interactions (Menchik and Tian 2008). The development of a digital habitus encompasses not only ITC proficiency but also the familiarity, comfort and confidence gained from socialising through virtual interactions. This would entail mastery of the norms, protocols and manners appropriate to various settings of digital communication (Yao and Sida 2023, 3).

According to Yao and Sida (2023, 3), younger artists would have acquired their digital habitus through intensive socialisation with digital technologies from an early age, giving them an advantage over older artists who may have to work hard at developing a digital habitus. As habitus is formed largely through the unconscious absorption of cultural and social experiences and shapes perceptions within a specific field, it is also continuously evolving through the accretion of experience in new fields such as the digital space (Ruiu et. al. 2023, 2).

5.4 Expanding on Bourdieu's notion of capital in the digital space

Within the digital field, different forms of capital obtained through different platforms define participation and success, creating a unique set of power relations. Given that capital is inherently linked to Bourdieu's notion of the field, it is essential to apply his concept of capital to the digital space, to determine why and how some independent artists achieve greater engagement, gain more followers and secure more opportunities than others. For instance, users who invest economic capital in one platform for paid subscriptions or profiles should secure wider capabilities, resources and reach than users who use basic unpaid profiles. Within the various platforms, individuals compete for resources that give them visibility and, in effect, digital social capital; "likes " translate into engagement and validation. Within the digital space, algorithms have the ability to determine visibility and therefore control access to content and shape user practices. What is of particular significance is that capital or influence on one platform does not necessarily translate or get transferred to another digital platform, although it may accumulate social capital and, in some instances, economic capital in the physical space. But if capital gained on one platform remains within the boundaries of that platform, users can develop different sets of audiences or forms of social capital on different platforms.

In studies of digital inequality, sociologists have expanded Bourdieu's concept of capital by introducing the idea of "digital capital." Digital capital reflects the reach, scale, and

sophistication of a person's online behaviour. According to Ignatow and Robinson (2014),[47] some forms of digital capital can be immediately transferable – such as programming skills that generate economic capital – while in areas like social media, where most independent artists tend to operate, interactions using the space translate into digital social capital. This form of capital does not typically enhance a holder's attractiveness in the labour market. However, artists with a large amount of digital social capital can exchange this for forms of capital such as cultural or economic capital, thus making themselves more desirable in the physical art world.

5.4.1 Developing the notion of digital social capital

In the digital age, the interplay between social capital and digital technology has become increasingly significant. As the internet has evolved from a conduit for transmitting information to a vital platform for social engagement, artists and other users have begun to recognise the potential of digital spaces to enhance their social capital. Social capital, as acquired through traditional social interactions and networks, is not uniformly available or equally accessible to everyone. It is contingent upon an individual's position in the social field, which is influenced by their habitus. While online platforms enable broader connections with audiences and collaborators beyond geographical constraints, initiating a process of democratisation by providing equal access to all participants, the habitus of individuals – shaped by their experiences in both physical and digital spaces – still significantly affects how they acquire social capital.

In the context of the art world, social capital is essential for artists seeking to position themselves advantageously. The volume of social capital possessed by an artist is dependent upon the size of their networks and the amount of capital held by each individual in that network (Codell 2021, 6). For Bourdieu, social capital resides in hierarchical relationships of power, which are particularly prominent in the art world where value is determined by established hierarchies and the possession of various forms of capital. In Johannesburg, this hierarchy has been dominated by prominent commercial galleries which, because of their resources, are able to provide their artists with opportunities, notably visibility to an accumulated network of collectors and institutions, which translates into desirability. Recently, these hierarchies have been challenged by the growing prominence of independent exhibition

[47] Ignatow and Robinson, "Pierre Bourdieu: Theorizing the Digital."

venues and artist-run spaces (Codell 2021, 76) as well as through the digital space, where artists can simulate these activities independently.

Among the various forms of capital, the development of social capital takes precedence in the digital space, as this field is fundamentally designed to connect users and facilitate information sharing and engagement. If traditional social capital is characterised as built from the relationships inherent in networks and the goodwill generated through social relations that can be mobilised to obtain needed resources (Adler and Kwon 2002; Lin 2002, 19; Smith et al. 2017, 20), the concept can equally be applied to the development of digital social capital, albeit through the use of different tools and methods of resource acquisition.

Traditionally, social capital involves accessing resources such as information, assistance, and money through in-person conversations, physical support, or direct funding (Gedajlovic et al. 2013). In the digital realm, the resources associated with social capital manifest in different ways, for example, through the sharing or reposting of an artist's content by others, collaborative efforts to cross-promote posts across various profiles or platforms and generating income through digital transactions.

These practices are ultimately driven by the three key elements that constitute social capital: a) the development of relationships, b) providing access to resources, and c) utilising those resources to achieve desired outcomes. This framework underscores that the production of social capital is closely linked to investment in social relationships – a principle that also applies to the accumulation of digital social capital, especially as mediated through social media platforms. In the following section, I will explore how traditional forms of social capital acquisition translate into practices in the digital space, focusing on the accumulation of digital social capital.

5.4.2 Strategies for gaining digital social capital

As social capital develops through networking between participants in a field, strong relationships, norms and social trust emerge (Adler & Kwon 2002; Lin 2017). Putnum (2001, 93) specifically addresses the bonding and bridging dimensions of social capital as unique features that facilitate knowledge creation, support and sharing across firm boundaries. Social networks are the underlying structural basis for the transfer of knowledge, with the strength of relations developing capital within a field. Social capital in turn manifests as connections, shared values and understandings, giving rise to trust and collaboration between different participants

in the digital space (Putnum 2001; Bosua and Evas 2024, 71). Kwon (2018) argues that social media users purposefully and strategically invest in online social connections with the anticipation of accumulating resources from the relationships. This raises critical questions about the nature of social capital in the digital space – how it exists, evolves and is acquired – underlining the need to refine the notion of digital social capital.

Digital social capital refers to the networks and resources acquired through relationships, visibility and establishing trust in the digital space. Similarly to the physical art world, participation and engagement with other users in the digital space are essential in accumulating digital social capital. Users need actively to occupy and contribute to the network by consistently participating (interacting with other users, producing content). Faucher (2024, 24) argues that without active participation, users' digital social capital remains stagnant or can rapidly decline, as algorithms tend to prioritise more active users in their newsfeeds. Social media algorithms influence user engagement by altering the content displayed and shaping how users perceive and interact with that content. Algorithms may give preference to certain types of information over others, based on the patterns and correlations that distinguish user preferences and interests. Consequently, the content users see in their respective digital environments is largely determined by social media algorithms (Poleac and Ghergut-Babii 2024, 70-71).

Given the fast-paced nature of content creation from a large user base, user-generated content can quickly lose relevance, falling 'below the fold' as its visibility decreases. This directly impacts the accumulation of digital social capital, meaning that increased production and participation on the part of users is a crucial factor in enhancing their digital social capital (Faucher 2024, 24).

5.4.3 Accumulating a network through followers

An online user can accumulate digital social capital by building a large and engaged following on digital platforms. The size and quality of a user's network play a significant role in shaping their visibility and influence in the online space. Digital social capital is accumulated similarly to traditional social capital, through connectivity, trust, and reciprocity; but in quantitative terms, the growth of a network in the digital space is much faster and more extensive than through physical interaction. While the size of the network often translates into perceptions of a user's influence, the quality and strength of the connections may not match the depth of relationships formed through traditional social capital.

I. Using multiple social network sites to reach diverse and broader audiences. Artists have indicated that they use a variety of platforms which they combine and tailor for specific audiences (Goetzman 2018). For instance, Facebook can be used to promote events and gauge attendance at exhibitions, while Instagram is more useful for creating interest in the work through studio images, process materials or images of the artist in front of their work (Goetzman 2018).
II. Building relationships through direct interactions: connecting with other artists, galleries and curators online by following their profiles or pages, reaching out by sending an email or direct message introducing themselves and expressing interest in their activities. This first point of contact creates visibility and lets people know that artists exist.
III. Collaborating with peers, galleries or other institutions to gain access and benefitting from visibility to their networks. For instance, when artists collaborate with others to share posts across platforms they can gain more likes and possibly more followers.

The digital space contributes to social capital as a whole as it increases contact between individuals and organisations that are geographically removed from each other, enabling individuals to create new ties and activate latent ties. In this context, digital platforms can democratise access to certain forms of capital while simultaneously reinforcing existing inequalities. For instance, individuals with greater economic or cultural capital may find it easier to access broadband. They will also find it easier to acquire digital social capital because of their existing habitus and social position (Faucher 2024, 25).[48] The 'average user' may be able to leverage their digital social capital for other purposes, but there is no clear connection between gaining likes and followers and achieving a higher status in another field (Faucher 2024, 25).

The role of both informal and formal social networks is to facilitate the effective and efficient creation and sharing of knowledge between individuals and organisations across boundaries. Social capital develops through networking – bonding and bridging (Putnam 2001, 93) – among actors, manifesting as strong relationships, norms, shared values, mutual understanding and social trust (Adler and Kwon, 2002; Lin, 2017).

[48] In the art world established artists like William Kentridge (b. 1953) or Zanele Muholi (b. 1972) can more easily acquire new followers, likes and favourites on their social media profiles as they are already well known and have the ability, through their own efforts or by employing teams, to build a strong presence online.

The internet and digitisation have caused a radical and irrevocable shift in practices in the field of art, impacting the relationship between artists and their public as well as other collaborators. In the nineteenth century, salons drove the production of art and generated interest from the audience. This was followed by artists showcasing their work independently and collaborating with dealers and galleries during a period that expanded the art market to the middle classes. In the twenty-first century, artists have the opportunity to engage with their audience in a completely different and more autonomous way through the internet, sharing personal narratives, studio practices, and actual works without the mediation of intermediaries.

5.5 Social capital vs digital social capital: quantitative and qualitative differences

There are key differences between the accumulation of social capital in physical spaces and digital social capital in the digital space. Traditionally, social capital is built through in-person interactions that require participants to be physically present at events such as exhibition openings, art fairs, public lectures, workshops and talks, to engage with a specific network. Social capital also requires more effort and is accumulated more slowly, because of an artist's inability to be in more than one place at a time. This may also result in a smaller, more localised network. Moreover, traditional social capital may not be universally available or equally accessible, as it relies on an individual's position within the social field and their ability to access influential networks.

In contrast, digital social capital transcends geographical boundaries and physical presence, existing in a disembodied form which has the potential to grow exponentially and be more diverse. Using the digital space users can connect instantly and more frequently, though the interactions may be less personal and lack the depth and longevity of in-person interactions.

Even with online interactions, the habitus of individuals – shaped by their experiences and dispositions in both physical and digital contexts – still plays a significant role in determining how effectively they acquire and leverage digital social capital. For example, artists with greater exposure to technology and online tools may be better equipped to use the digital space to build connections and share their work in innovative ways. Artists without access to the internet or technical equipment such as a smartphone, camera or laptop will be disadvantaged.

Traditional social capital may fluctuate over time, as moving from a particular geographical location may cause a change in a person's social network. Although digital social capital may

fluctuate as relationships are formed and abandoned, digital space enables users to stay connected no matter where they are located (Ellison et al. 2007, 1146).

5.6 Converting digital social capital into other forms of capital

The early exponents of social capital theory – Bourdieu (1986/2011), Coleman (1988), Portes (1998), Burt (2000), and Lin (2002) – suggest that social capital is fungible with other forms of capital (such as economic and cultural) that necessitate some form of investment. Faucher (2024, 29) claims that digital (online) social capital is unable to translate directly or immediately into other forms of capital. For instance, likes on Facebook cannot be directly exchanged for connections or monetary value.

While this argument holds merit, as a literal conversion of likes into money is indeed unlikely, I would maintain that digital social capital can in fact be translated into other forms of capital, particularly as it pertains to artists creating communities and using social media to promote and sell their work. Artists who promote their work online and can use platforms like Instagram as virtual gallery space will receive direct inquiries that lead to sales. Artists are able to sell artworks to their accumulated network of followers without having to pay a percentage to another party like a gallery or even the platform host. Promoting their work on an Instagram feed might involve adding stories, downloadable catalogues or channels where selected subscribers can purchase work directly. Artists have also launched mini-auctions of existing work from their studios as a way to generate revenue or clear space.

Another strategy for indirectly translating digital social capital into other forms of capital would be to collaborate with other social media users – whether colleagues, artists, galleries or curators – in sharing and cross-promoting content. For instance, if an emerging artist has a show with a prominent gallery, and both parties promote the exhibition on their respective platforms, both collaborators have the potential to widen their network, and the artist grows his or her cultural capital through affiliation with the gallery.

5.7 The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the field of art in Johannesburg

The COVID-19 pandemic, which became a global reality in March 2020, led to a dramatic increase in digital activity across various industries, including the art world. The global health crisis necessitated restrictions on certain personal freedoms to control the spread of the virus. In South Africa, the government invoked emergency powers, implementing nationwide

lockdowns, curfews, and limitations on the movement of people and goods.[49] These measures also included the prohibition of public transport and gatherings, and mandated the temporary closure of businesses and certain trade operations (Singh and Simbarashe 2022).

The closure of non-essential businesses and the ban on public gatherings directly affected museums, galleries, and other cultural spaces. The restrictions rendered it impossible for them physically to display artworks or to host exhibitions, art fairs, and other events central to traditional ways of acquiring the kinds of social, symbolic, and cultural capital that provide validation in the art world. This led to significant financial losses for both institutions and individual artists.

In response, artists, galleries and other art world participants rapidly embraced digital strategies to maintain their presence and connect with their audiences (Gerlis 2020). With exhibitions and art fairs cancelled or postponed, the shift to online platforms became crucial for staying connected with existing networks and, for some, expanding to international ones. As noted by Andropoulus (2020), the South African art community swiftly adapted to the pandemic's challenges, finding innovative ways to market and sell artworks despite the constraints of isolation. Artists, galleries, and other art world practitioners and institutions quickly embraced online exhibitions, virtual tours, social media campaigns, and digital marketplaces. This rapid digital transformation not only enabled them to stay visible and productive but also redefined the role of the digital space in the art world. The pandemic acted as a catalyst, compelling the art world to establish a more significant and permanent digital presence. As social distancing and stay-at-home orders became the norm worldwide, the shift towards digital platforms was accelerated, driving a global reliance on digital tools and social media (Siddiqua et al. 2023, 10).

Even before the pandemic, the digital space had offered opportunities for connection, audience-building, collaboration, and artistic discovery. However, with the enforced restrictions, working online or engaging with digital platforms shifted from being a secondary or supplementary option to becoming an essential means of sustaining visibility and engagement. Participants in the art world moved towards different strategies to meet their immediate needs. Many galleries used websites to present online exhibitions and online viewing rooms that featured slideshows,

[49] Disaster Management Act: Regulations to Address, Prevent and Combat the Spread of Coronavirus COVID-19: Amendment. (South Africa. Office of the Presidency 2020).

video clips, and artist interviews to create immersive exhibition-like experiences.[50] For instance, the Goodman Gallery established an Online Program that guided visitors through various virtual exhibitions, allowing audiences from anywhere to engage with artworks that would otherwise have been inaccessible (Kazim 2020).

Everard Read launched their first online exhibition in April 2020, and received a record response from their audience, requesting 300 portfolios from their four galleries (Andropoulus, 2020). At the time Charles Shields made an interesting observation about the old art world gaining new significance under these extraordinary circumstances in the digital space, and the gallery had a better result with sales than they would have had under normal circumstances (Andropoulus, 2020). This demonstrates the value of the gallery's expansion of the art field to the digital space, which made possible greater visibility, interaction and engagement with their audiences. Everard Read also significantly expanded their social capital to a larger, global audience that, before the pandemic, was limited to those who could access their physical locations. The higher response rate to their digital presentation indicates that Everard Read were successful in converting their social capital into economic capital through the sale of artworks, illustrating that capital in the digital space is indeed fluid and transferrable.

The Everard Read strategy of presenting works online and sending follow-up catalogues was not limited to galleries. The conversion of digital social capital to other forms of capital is especially significant because it highlights how digital engagement and online platforms, open to anyone, can offer new avenues for generating revenue, disrupting traditional art market structures, and providing artists and galleries with opportunities to earn economic capital outside of conventional art world gatekeeping mechanisms.

While galleries worked towards launching online programming and exhibitions alongside newly created viewing rooms (Rogers 2020), art fairs looked for ways to take their entire fairs online. In Johannesburg, Turbine Art Fair, Latitudes and Art Joburg launched online art fairs in 2020 to overcome the challenges of the pandemic. The digital formats for these fairs were basic and focused on effective functionality, search ability and making new art discoveries (Wood 2020). Online art fairs offered a temporary alternative to in-person events, but the focus was not on sales, as was reflected in annual art market reports. In 2021, the global art market report by Art Basel and UBS recorded that while art fair sales accounted for 43% of all sales made by art

[50] Lucy MacGarry and Roberta Coci, Interview 11 December 2023.

dealers in 2019, in 2020 this fell to only 13% of their income. As many as 61% of planned physical global art fairs and events were cancelled due to the pandemic (Corrigall 2022).

A significant strategy to support artists during the pandemic was the collaborative venture by Sirdar Group, Mrs Woolf and Artists Proof Studio. The Lockdown Collection comprised a virtual auction, the proceeds of which were divided between individual artists and the Solidarity Fund, with the first iteration raising an estimated R2 million. In addition to raising funds, this initiative created visibility for new artists, some of whom were propelled to success. An example is Cinthia Sifa Mulanga, who not only sold work but received offers for mentorship and agency representation from Lucy MacGarry and Roberta Coci.

In mid-March 2020, with restrictions on in-person attendance in place, Strauss & Co. developed a digital platform to livestream their auctions. Strauss & Co. became the first auction house globally to livestream auctions, an innovation that not only sustained their existing buyer base but also attracted a new global audience. The shift towards a more international clientele marked a significant change in their business model, enabling them successfully to navigate the pandemic by embracing digital solutions.[51] This development has had a significant impact on the field of art in Johannesburg. The increased interest and connectivity with international audiences have expanded the field's reach, potentially encouraging international buyers to participate in auctions or establish direct connections with local artists. However, the shift also brings with it certain challenges. For instance, artists and institutions may restructure their pricing to align advantageously with the global market, but in terms of affordability, this is to the detriment of local buyers.

While galleries, art fairs and other art world institutions were taking their businesses online, artists were focussing on producing and self-promoting works and processes on platforms such as Facebook and Instagram to generate income. According to Corrigall (2022), there was an increase in art production during COVID when artists found time to dedicate themselves to their practice without the external pressures of having to produce for exhibitions or other projects. Simultaneously, due to a lack of projects, artists were placed under pressure to market their works themselves through social media or their websites. Many unrepresented (independent) artists blossomed via sales through their Instagram networks (Corrigall, 2022). Artists were also posting more about their studio and art-making practices, giving audiences insights into

[51] Wilhelm van Rensburg, senior art specialist and Head Curator at Strauss and Co. Interview 17 November 2023.

their working habits. Cape Town-based artist Maja Marx observed that during this time agency seemed to shift away from the middlemen and gatekeepers, and toward artists as creators and drivers of content (in Corrigall 2022).

Emerging and early-career artists were particularly vulnerable to the pandemic's impact, facing the greatest challenges, including loss of income, cancelled opportunities, and limited access to institutional support. These hardships may have motivated many to adopt more autonomous or independent practices, using digital platforms to gain greater control over their creative output and to stay connected with their audience. The pandemic acted as a catalyst for realising the value of the digital space and emphasised the importance of adaptability within the art world.

Although the impact of COVID-19 presented exceptional circumstances for art world structures to be redefined, and although the post-pandemic years have seen art world participants return to their brick-and-mortar structures, the use of the digital space has left a lasting impression. As Julie Taylor[52] notes:

> Every gallery now has a good website, many galleries have e-commerce enabled websites, and many galleries are using Artsy.[53] Many galleries are sharing their pricing publicly, which has never happened before, right? So, I think across the board there has been a huge increase in transparency and artists have access to all of this as well.

As Taylor suggests, the increased investment in online infrastructure marks a significant reconfiguration of the field. It also reflects a shift in the broader field dynamics as it not only allows for greater transparency but also enables artists to deploy similar strategies, to use resources such as websites, e-commerce platforms and, especially, social media, to engage with audiences on the same digital playing field as established institutions such as galleries.

5.8 Digital marketplaces: Latitudes Online

Latitudes Online emerged as a significant development on the Johannesburg art scene, transitioning online during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Latitudes Art Fair was launched in

[52] Julie Taylor, Interviewed by author, online, May 2023.
[53] Artsy is an online platform that connects collectors, galleries, museums, and artists to facilitate the buying, selling, and discovery of art. Founded in 2011, Artsy offers a digital marketplace where users can explore a wide range of contemporary and historical artworks, browse through galleries and institutions, and even bid on pieces at online auctions.

2019, just a year before the pandemic. Latitudes Online was subsequently launched on July 18, 2020, when the founders, Lucy MacGarry and Roberta Coci, were forced to cancel the second iteration of their physical fair. All three major fairs in Johannesburg – Joburg, Turbine Art Fair, and Latitudes – introduced digital versions in 2020, but Latitudes was the only platform designed to have long-term sustainability, positioning itself as a permanent online marketplace for collectors, artists, and galleries. MacGarry and Coci's plan was to develop an extensive online discovery platform similar in structure to platforms like Artsy and Artnet,[54] which are global online marketplaces where users can discover, buy and sell work. Other platforms have opted to be more selective about who is entitled to present art, such as Occula.[55]

At that time, when many galleries were creating smaller online initiatives, such as viewing rooms or individual online exhibitions, none had the expansive vision that informed the Latitudes project. The original Latitudes fair was conceptualised to mirror the traditional fair format, where exhibitors apply for spaces to showcase their work, but with one key differentiating factor: it aimed to provide independent artists, non-profits, and studio spaces the opportunity to exhibit alongside established galleries. MacGarry and Coci sought to bridge the gap for international collectors, giving them access to the entire artistic ecosystem on the continent – encompassing not just galleries, but all practitioners, regardless of institutional affiliation or commercial backing. By functioning as an online marketplace, Latitudes allows artists, galleries, and studio spaces to display their work and gain international visibility. Artists can either pay a monthly fee to be listed on the platform or arrange a lower commission on sales with Latitudes. In both cases, artists maintain the ability to establish direct relationships with collectors through the platform, which has helped to create a large and influential network encompassing artists, collectors, and other key players in the art ecosystem.

A key feature of Latitudes Online is the way that it challenges traditional institutional structures. It allows artists without gallery representation to participate, and it fosters transparency in the art world by publicly listing prices and bringing more independent artists into the system. While Latitudes has observed that the platform attracts a new generation of collectors – many of whom are younger, first-time buyers drawn to more affordable prices – it has had a significant

[54] Artnet is an online platform that provides services related to the global art market. It is primarily known for its online art auctions, gallery sales, and art price database. One of its main features is the ArtNet Price Database, which tracks historical sales data and provides insights into the value of artworks across various categories. In addition to auctions, Artnet also offers exclusive editorial content and analysis of the art world.
[55] Occula is an exclusive online platform dedicated to contemporary art in the Asia-Pacific region. It functions as a digital space for art galleries, institutions, collectors, and artists to connect, showcase, and explore artworks. Occula focuses on providing a curated selection of exhibitions, artist profiles, and art-related content to a global audience.

impact on existing structures too. By promoting greater accessibility and transparency, Latitudes makes available artists and artworks that might previously have only been accessible through what are perceived by some as intimidating gallery spaces (Corrigall 2022).

Latitudes Online further disrupts traditional gallery structures by enabling artists to sell directly to collectors, bypassing the control and high commission structures typically associated with galleries. This shift in the art market increases the autonomy of artists, enabling them to establish more independent practices and relationships with collectors. Yet despite the focus on highlighting and developing independent artists and cultural production, Coci notes that it has not been independent artists alone who have contributed to the platform's growth. Rather, it has been the affiliations with galleries that have played a pivotal role in helping Latitudes scale its platform and expand its audience. Galleries constitute a significant source of digital social capital that supports the platform's continued success. This process is facilitated by various factors, as discussed earlier in this chapter. Latitudes taps into the existing networks of galleries that have been cultivated over the years through both online and in-person interactions. These networks are the result of accumulated social capital at art fairs, within gallery spaces, and through the development of relationships with collectors. By collaborating with galleries – whether through exhibitions at Shepstone Gardens, listings on their platform, or involvement in the fair – Latitudes is able to build a large and engaged following from multiple sources.

Latitudes Online Editorials, which feature interviews with artists, reviews and articles on wider art world trends, have a significant impact on both individual artists and the organisations affiliated with Latitudes. These online editorials have helped to remedy the declining presence of art criticism in printed media in the Johannesburg art field, with only a few publications undertaking critical discussions that contribute to the accumulation and redistribution of social, cultural and symbolic capital. The Latitudes editorial programme is a site for cultural dialogue and the dissemination of knowledge, shaping taste and opinion and providing recognition for artists and their work. By providing this form of validation for artists, coupled with their strategies to broaden the art ecosystem, Latitudes Online has initiated a shift towards inclusivity and diversity in the field of art.

5.9 Conclusion

This chapter has explored how the evolution of the digital space has revolutionised how human relationships are forged and maintained, enabling online interactions to generate tangible benefits previously accessible only through traditional social networks. By applying Bourdieu's theoretical framework, I have examined the digital space as a distinct field, highlighting its

interconnectedness with the broader art world and emphasising the importance of developing a digital habitus to foster comfort and familiarity in navigating this space. I have discussed strategies for gaining digital social capital and how this form of capital can be converted into other forms, such as cultural and symbolic capital.

The chapter has also addressed the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the art world in Johannesburg and examined how artists, galleries, and other institutions quickly adapted to the digital space to maintain visibility and viability. Despite the challenges imposed by the pandemic, artists and galleries were swift to leverage the digital space, moving their operations online and reaching new audiences.

Finally, I explored the impact of the Latitudes Online digital marketplace on independent artists in Johannesburg and the field of art generally. The chapter as a whole underscores the value of the digital space as a vital resource for independent artists, providing them with the opportunity to develop more autonomous practices by challenging traditional structures in the art world.

The following chapter will delve further into the practices of independent artists in Johannesburg and examine in detail how they have effectively utilised the digital space to acquire capital and advance their positions within the art world.

Chapter 6: Independent artists in Johannesburg

6.1 Introduction

As discussed in the previous chapter, the expansion of the art world into the digital space in this century has created new opportunities for artists to develop independent strategies for promoting the visibility of their practice, distributing their artworks, and growing their audience, all without the mediation of galleries or other traditional institutions. This transformation has also had a significant impact on the independent art scene in Johannesburg, where opportunities for independent artists have multiplied and diversified. This is evident in various forms, such as collaborations between independent artists and galleries, the participation of independent artists in art fairs, the proliferation of independent art collectives and initiatives, and the strategic use of digital platforms and social media to build networks and promote art.

This chapter addresses several key objectives of the research, drawing on data from interviews with independent artists based in Johannesburg. First, the chapter clarifies the term "independent artist" within the context of the field of art, drawing on the opinions of artist subjects. The resultant definition is then compared with similar concepts in other creative industries. Secondly, the chapter explores the specific motivations, strategies and practices of independent artists, examining how they have utilised digital tools and platforms between 2020 and 2024. The use of the digital space in the art world prior to the COVID-19 pandemic is compared to its use during and immediately after the pandemic, when digital spaces and social media platforms became the primary means for artists to share their work and maintain relationships. The shift has had far-reaching implications for the art field in Johannesburg.

Bourdieu's concepts provide an essential framework for understanding the situation of independent artists within the Johannesburg art field, their choice of independent practices, and the nature of their relationships with the broader art field and its existing structures. This chapter also investigates how independent artists acquire digital social capital, and how such capital can be converted into other forms of capital in the physical art field. Exploring the intersection of digital and traditional forms of capital, the chapter reflects on how evolving practices and the use of digital platforms have shifted the perceptions of artists and created a culture in which they seek to understand more about broader art world practices while choosing to remain autonomous.

6.2 Selection of artist subjects

The artists selected for this research were eligible because they self-identified as independent artists practising in Johannesburg. Pinpointing the exact number of independent artists in the city was a complex task, given that artists' practices are fluid and constantly evolving. New artists are continually emerging while existing artists frequently adapt and redefine their roles within the field of art.

The selection of interview subjects for this study aimed to represent a diverse range of locations, collectives, and networks within Johannesburg's independent art scene. To ensure broad representation, artists were chosen from several well-known collectives and creative spaces such as Bag Factory, Asisebenze, August House, Ellis House, and 11 Alexander Street, as well as other independent studio spaces. Also included were artists who have established their own galleries, such as M.J. Turpin and Banele Khoza.

The purpose of this approach was to capture a representative sample of independent artists, each with their own unique experiences and perspectives shaped by the specific locations and collectives with which they are affiliated. By including artists of different ages, divergent backgrounds and networks, the goal was to reach a comprehensive understanding of the practices preferred and challenges faced by a variety of independent artists in Johannesburg. In total, 21 artists were invited to participate, with 17 ultimately agreeing to be interviewed. The sample included individuals of different genders and cultural backgrounds, with ages ranging from 28 to 55.

6.3 Applications of Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, field and capital to independent artists

Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, field, and capital provide a valuable framework for understanding the dispositions, motivations and practices of independent artists in Johannesburg, as well as the economic and social circumstances under which they operate. *Habitus* helps to explore the dispositions and ways of thinking that shape independent artists' practices. These dispositions are influenced by personal experiences, education, background, and the sociocultural context in which artists work (Bourdieu 2000; Grenfell and Hardy 2007; Vakalopoulus 2022). By considering these factors, we gain insight into why artists choose to

pursue their art independently rather than committing to exclusive agreements with galleries or institutions.

Bourdieu's notion of *field* is essential for understanding the social arenas in which artists compete for resources, positions, recognition, and power (Bourdieu 1993b). The field of art in Johannesburg is complex, with dynamic sets of relationships among commercial galleries, artist-run spaces, collective studios, auctions, independent practices, and private museums (see Chapter 3). The Johannesburg art field consists of overlapping subfields that coexist and, in some cases, compete for visibility and resources. Independent artists must navigate this field, balancing traditional structures with alternative practices to accumulate resources granting them access to income and recognition in the art world. By examining the relationships and engagements between independent artists and subfields such as galleries, artist-run spaces, auctions, and art fairs, we can better understand the artists' positioning within the local art scene. We will also investigate how independent artists navigate the rules, regulations and limitations within the field constituted by the digital space.

As discussed in Chapter Four, the rise of digital platforms and social media has significantly transformed dynamics within the traditional art world by offering open-access availability and increased visibility. These changes have introduced new business models and e-commerce opportunities that are critical to the transformation of the art market. Independent visual artists now have unprecedented opportunities to build and expand their networks, giving them access to a wider range of opportunities. Through online platforms, artists can increase their visibility on a global scale, positioning themselves within an art community that extends far beyond physical galleries or exhibitions.

Moreover, the digital space enables artists to access various forms of capital, including digital social capital (the networks and relationships they cultivate online) and economic capital through the direct online sale of their artworks (often bypassing traditional gallery systems and intermediaries). This shift has highlighted two important issues. The first is that the digital space has enabled artists to acquire digital social capital through which they can negotiate their position in the art field. Secondly, it has prompted artists to reconsider the role of traditional galleries and reshape their interactions with them. Central to these revisions is Bourdieu's notion of *capital*, the possession of which has a decisive influence on an artist's success, visibility, and influence within the art world.

Economic capital is vital as it secures artists access to resources such as studio space, materials and income for living and travel expenses. While gallery artists may have regular income

through the gallery promoting their work, independent artists are obliged to draw on various revenue streams within and outside of the field of art. Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital comprises the symbolic credentials with which independent artists enter the field, or which they accumulate through recognition in the local or international art scenes. These include inclusion in exhibitions, biennales, publications, awards or significant dialogues. The notion of social capital is also significant in understanding how independent artists circumvent the dominant commercial gallery system. Artists rely heavily on social connectivity to foster relationships, maintain continuity and stay engaged with their public. Access to these resources has become more readily available through the use of interactive digital space and tools, which mediate the process of building a strong artistic persona and presence.

Artists use the digital space and social media platforms in particular to accumulate digital social capital by showcasing and selling their work, promoting events, providing insight into their creative processes and connecting with other artists, curators, and galleries. Engagement in the digital space through likes, comments, shares and increasing one's followers is what constitutes digital social capital.

Such strategies collectively contribute to building a strong online presence and following, in the hope that they will translate into real-world opportunities. The translation of digital social capital into more tangible forms of capital is therefore a key area to explore in the data gathered from the interviews. Digital social capital is not without its challenges and independent artists must negotiate digital visibility through playing to the algorithm, ever mindful of copyright and security procedures when engaging in the digital space (Lim 2023; Faucher 2024; Kong 2024).

The above remarks illustrate how Bourdieu's theories have been applied to the data gathered from independent artist subjects. From the coding process, an overarching sense was gleaned of the shared identity of independent visual artists in Johannesburg, together with perspectives on independent practice and the strategies that independent artists use in the physical and digital art worlds. The following section will therefore define what it means to be an independent visual artist. It will then examine the data relating to artists' practices and positions, their relationships with other participants and structures in the art world, how they navigate traditional art world structures, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their work and how they leverage digital platforms in their artistic practice. The following diagram portrays the codes identified as relevant to the practices of independent artists, in preparation for the analysis.

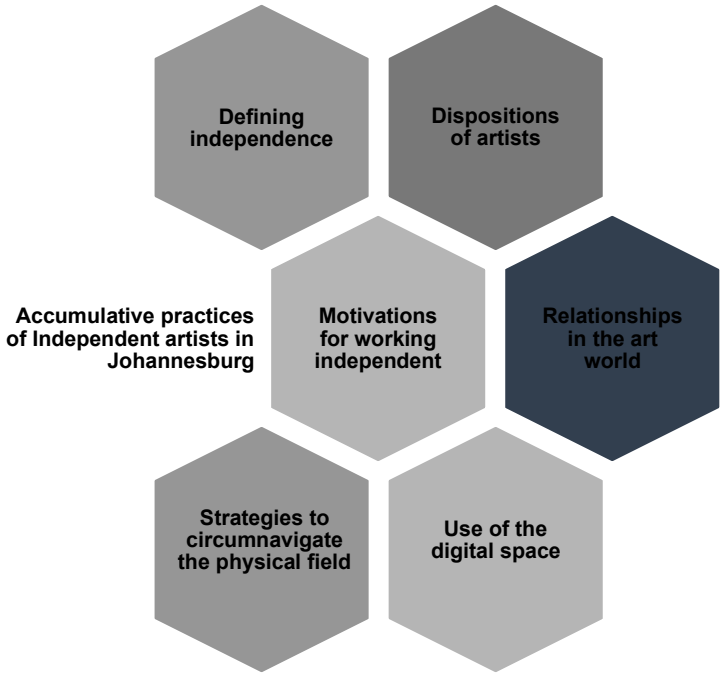


Figure 6.1: Codes for analysis of the habitus of independent artists in Johannesburg

The analysis focuses on answering the central question of this study, which concerns how expansion of the digital space and the rise of social media have led to new possibilities beyond the gallery system for artists in Johannesburg, 2020–2024.

6.4 Defining the term 'independent artist' in the field of art

The field of art in Johannesburg has historically been dominated by a system of large, medium and smaller galleries which operate as key institutions withing the field of cultural production through which artists have been able to present their work. These institutions have been instrumental in building cultural capital for themselves and artists through the interlinked processes of exhibiting, selling and becoming known. Pursuing a career as an artist and opting to remain independent requires dedication, commitment and entrepreneurial capacity (Moloi 2019).

The concept of independent cultural production has been widely discussed in various other fields, including in performing arts such as music (Hesmondhalgh 1997; Kartik and Mishra 2022) and dance (Hesmondhalgh 1998), as well as publishing (Thomas 2017). There has, however, been less exploration of independent practices among visual artists. Referring to visual artists in Guangzhou, Liu (2024) suggests that independent artists are those who work on their own without a long-term contract with either an art agency or gallery. To supplement this

concise definition, material gleaned from respondents in this research will be used to devise a more comprehensive characterisation.

A consensus emerged among Johannesburg visual artists interviewed that the term "independent artist" typically refers to someone who is not exclusively represented by a gallery or does not have exclusive arrangements with any institution. In the interviews, many respondents emphasised that being independent implies self-employment and an entrepreneurial, business-orientated mindset.[56] Independence requires the artist to manage not only production but also the accumulation of economic capital (through sales and commissions), social capital (through networks and collaborations), and cultural capital (through exhibitions, publications, and critical recognition) (respondents Kayser, Khoza, Mabusela, Maswana, Reid and Taylor). This multi-tasking role reflects the compilation of the habitus of independence from a set of dispositions that favour self-reliance, flexibility, and entrepreneurialism. Independent art practice does not reject the gallery altogether but prefers flexible terms in any contractual agreement. It involves collaborating with galleries and institutions while maintaining a degree of autonomy. Qhamanande Maswana explains that his relationships with galleries are on a consignment basis and that he manages the decision to take on projects with individual galleries. In this respect, galleries do not have the ability to influence where independent artists show their work.[57] This flexibility enables them to pursue multiple trajectories within the field, avoiding the monopolisation of their career by a single institutional actor.

Similarly, independent artists in the music industry are seen as artists who are not under contract to major record labels (Kartik and Mishra 2022, 513). The music industry's DIY (do-it-yourself) ethos offers a useful analogy for the flexibility associated with artistic independence. DIY is a form of self-management that emerged from the punk movement in the 1980s (Bennett, 2018). Punk bands challenged the status quo in the music business by circumventing the recording and marketing services of major record labels. Artists sought authenticity through direct-to-fan engagement, bypassing the traditional structure of management, production and marketing. Similarly, independent artists in Johannesburg have challenged the traditional notion of exclusive gallery representation. They have also assumed responsibility for networking, publishing, promoting, and selling their art.

[56] Mbali Tshabalala, interview by author, Johannesburg, October 23, 2023
[57] Qhamanande Maswana, interview by author, Johannesburg, December 2024

For some artists, being independent also meant independence from market pressure.[58] In this sense, independence means that artists can produce work without being influenced by the necessity of generating a sustainable income from the sale of their works. Stephen Hobbs provided a nuanced perspective on how his view of artistic independence is constructed in relation to freedom from market pressures, involving his assuming a position within the field that resists dependence on sales for survival:

> I am not hard-wired to have a studio-based practice that almost exclusively participates in a buyers' market. My definition of an independent artist, I should say my independence, is constructed from having alternative revenue streams so that I can pursue my creativity and art making in a way that I would like, without having too many market forces imposed on the outcome.

This view recognises that Hobbs's habitus is shaped by a family background in the arts and evinces an autonomous disposition toward multidisciplinary work outside the constraints of traditional commercial structures. His reference to other revenue streams indicates how he resists the commercial pressures of the art world by not having to depend on the sale of his work. By choosing to create art from a more flexible position within the field, engaging in multidisciplinary practices outside of traditional commercial structures, he gains greater creative and positional autonomy.[59] This perspective resonates with many artists who believe that their independent art practices allow them to experiment and evolve without the pressure to sell their work (respondents Kayser, Strydom, Vuuren).

Independence also offers mobility within the field, allowing artists to engage in project-to-project collaborations that enhance visibility and symbolic capital without binding them to the demands of a single institution.[60] Chloe Reid[61] noted that the term "independent" is often overly generalised, and felt that the various ways in which artists operate, diverging from traditional modes of representation and support from established institutions, require a more nuanced description.

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[58] M.J. Turpin, Interview by author, Johannesburg, August, 2, 2023.
[59] Bourdieu distinguishes between two aspects of autonomy: a) positional autonomy, referring to the nature of relations between specific positions in the field and positions in other contexts; and b) relational autonomy, referring to relations between principal ways of working within a context or a field and those emanating from other contexts (Maton 2005, 697).
[60] Bevan de Wet. Interview by author, Johannesburg, November 2, 2022.
[61] Interview by author, Online, February 7, 2024

Reid's view is consonant with what Bourdieu calls historical autonomy. This notion by Bourdieu maintains that independent artistic practices may appear autonomous on the surface, but are inherently intertwined with existing economic and cultural fields and their associated power dynamics (Maton 2005). In other words, even when artists seem to be practising independently, their work continues to be shaped by larger structures within the art world, such as galleries, institutions and market forces, as well as the social and economic conditions that define their position within these structures.

Any attempt to define independent artists and their practices must acknowledge that these artists remain interconnected with the broader field of cultural production. This interconnectedness reflects the social contexts in which cultural production takes place and highlights that artists practising independently are, in fact, interdependent on or with established institutional structures rather than entirely separate from them.

Within the Johannesburg art field, the independent artist can be understood as one who operates without exclusive representation by a single gallery or institution, instead managing the production, promotion and distribution of their work through flexible, often self-determined arrangements. While independence is frequently framed as autonomy, Bourdieu's perspectives reveal it to be a relative and negotiated position within the field, shaped by the same structural forces that govern commercial and institutional art worlds.

The habitus of the independent artist is marked by dispositions toward self-reliance, adaptability, and entrepreneurialism and enables navigation across multiple networks and modes of engagement. Sustaining such a practice depends on the strategic accumulation and conversion of different forms of capital: economic capital through direct sales and alternative revenue streams; cultural capital through exhibitions, publications and critical recognition; social capital through professional and peer networks; and symbolic capital through the legitimacy conferred by visibility and reputation. In this sense, independence is less a withdrawal from the dominant structures of the art world than an alternative positioning within them—one that seeks to renegotiate access, visibility, and influence while remaining embedded in the power relations that define the field.

6.5. Artists' motivations for working independently

Independent artists are motivated to work outside of traditional galleries and institutional structures for various reasons. These include the desire for more autonomy over their practice, the inability to find suitable gallery representation, lack of opportunities, financial considerations and a preference for flexibility. To these must be added dispositions within their habitus formed by past experiences such as dissatisfaction with exhibiting gallery models and the opportunities offered by digital platforms. The data gathered from the interviews reveals that many independent artists' positioning in the field has been shaped by their experience of the institutional structure of galleries.

The relationship between independent artists and galleries is complex and informed by contrary dynamics in the field of art. Galleries represent a formalised field where power structures, economic interests, and institutional roles play out, focusing their efforts on symbolic capital (legitimacy and prestige) and economic capital (sales potential, access to high-value collectors). The field is safeguarded by representation and control, providing the gallery with some sort of security for the resources they invest in artists. In contrast, independent artists' practices are more flexible because they are driven by the need to find opportunities. Indeed, this flexibility is often a response to a perceived lack of opportunities, or inconsistency in the availability of opportunities, as well as the absence of guarantees regarding sales or prominence, even when the artists are represented by galleries. Independent artists must "hustle" to stay connected and find ways of sustaining themselves, whereas galleries have access to a broader range of resources. They benefit from a larger pool of artists from whom they can generate income, more sales potential, and a greater number of opportunities. These contrasting positions create tensions between artists and galleries.

Some artists indicated that their decision to work independently was driven by dissatisfaction with opaque gallery models as well as the mechanisms of control by galleries. Andrew Kayser,[62] for example, highlighted his frustration with restrictive gallery contracts, illustrating how negative experiences within the gallery system can shape an artist's habitus. Kayser indicated that this was his primary reason for seeking independence:

> I have had numerous bad experiences being locked into several contracts with galleries which I found extremely restrictive and then if that gallery is not performing

[62] Andrew Kayser, interview with author, Johannesburg, October 2023.

> for you, you are in a very compromised position. So I would say it [working independently] is to a large extent based on my experience working with galleries.

For artists like Kayser, whose habitus has been shaped by restrictive contractual arrangements and compromised bargaining positions, independence becomes a deliberate repositioning strategy. By opting for non-exclusive collaborations, Kayser retains the flexibility to mobilise economic capital directly through studio sales, while selectively engaging with galleries to accrue symbolic capital without surrendering control over his networks or output. He notes that while correspondence with collectors can extend over several months before resulting in a sale, the benefit of working independently is that he would retain all the profit from that sale.

There is a sentiment among some artists that galleries may not always prioritise the intellectual and conceptual dimensions of their work. This perception can motivate them to seek alternative forms of collaboration and exhibition opportunities outside of traditional gallery settings.[63]

Mbali Tshabalala's reluctance to sign up for exclusive gallery representation reflects a habitus that values independence. Her motivation for working independently is that she prefers collaborating with multiple platforms and artists. Her perception is that exclusivity "locks" artists into restrictive relationships. She noted that once artists are signed, they are beholden to the contract and have limited options for collaboration, typically requiring permission from their gallery to work outside of the agreement. Working independently, she believes, gives artists the freedom to engage in a more liberated and flexible practice. Mbali's habitus values autonomy, since – as mother and primary breadwinner in her family – she does not enjoy the luxury of limiting her opportunities for collaboration, needing to maintain flexibility and independence, even if this means sacrificing conventional benefits such as gallery representation. Her position-taking illustrates how social capital (relationships with multiple platforms, curators, and fellow artists) can be prioritised over the concentrated symbolic capital conferred by a single gallery's endorsement. This perspective is echoed by Johan Louw Stegmann, who observed that working with a particular gallery locks an artist into a particular avenue of exposure.[64]

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[63] Joni Brenner, interview with author, Johannesburg, October 2023.
[64] Johan Louw Stegmann, interview with the author, Johannesburg, November 2022.

For Banele Khoza[65] the cultivation of a substantial online following represents a deliberate strategy to build cultural and symbolic capital independently of galleries. Khoza indicated that growing his social media presence gave him the confidence to break away from gallery representation. With a strong following online, he was able to secure visibility for his work independently and build a career that was not reliant on representation by a single gallery.

The application of Bourdieu's theory suggests that the motivations of independent artists are shaped not solely by rational decision-making or external conditions, but by the interaction between their habitus and the structured conditions of the field. This underscores the centrality of the field–habitus relationship in understanding artistic positioning. Motivations to maintain independence are influenced by the forms of capital available to artists, their past experiences of institutional constraints, and their perceptions of where opportunities for growth and legitimacy lie. While galleries can offer valuable exposure and credibility, independence enables artists to pursue innovative and unconventional avenues of expression. In Johannesburg's art landscape, this dynamic produces a duality in which independent artists carve out their own identities and narratives while negotiating with—and remaining connected to—the dominant structures of the field. Such relational autonomy underscores the permeability of field boundaries and the fluidity with which artists may move between independent and institutional positions as their capital, opportunities, and habitus evolve.

The following section will examine specific strategies artists use to circumnavigate traditional art world structures.

6.6 Strategies used by independent artists to circumnavigate established art world structures

The relationship between independent artists and traditional institutions in Johannesburg is multifaceted and evolving, mirroring broader dynamics in the cultural field as well as the tensions faced by artists positioning themselves independently alongside galleries that dominate the distribution of economic and symbolic capital. Independent artists positioned outside these dominant structures must navigate unequal access to resources, audiences, and opportunities, often developing strategies that draw on the habitus they have acquired through their personal and professional histories. For instance, if artists begin their careers outside of

[65] Banele Khoza, interview with author, Johannesburg, April 2023.

Johannesburg, this simple fact can limit their ability to develop networks, access opportunities to show their work or gain funding. In other words, this can limit their ability to amass social and cultural capital. Compounding these issues is a lack of institutional support and an oversaturation of artists, coupled with a diminishing number of galleries willing to represent them. In consequence, many artists resort to a blended approach, balancing their artistic endeavours with full-time or part-time work in the industry or other fields. I will first look at the strategies that independent artists use to circumnavigate existing art world structures. I will then examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on artists' practices, and how they have continued to make use of the digital space and social media. The strategies outlined in the diagram below aim to accumulate and convert various forms of capital—economic, cultural, social, and symbolic—so that independent artists can reposition themselves within the field without being fully dependent on established gatekeepers.

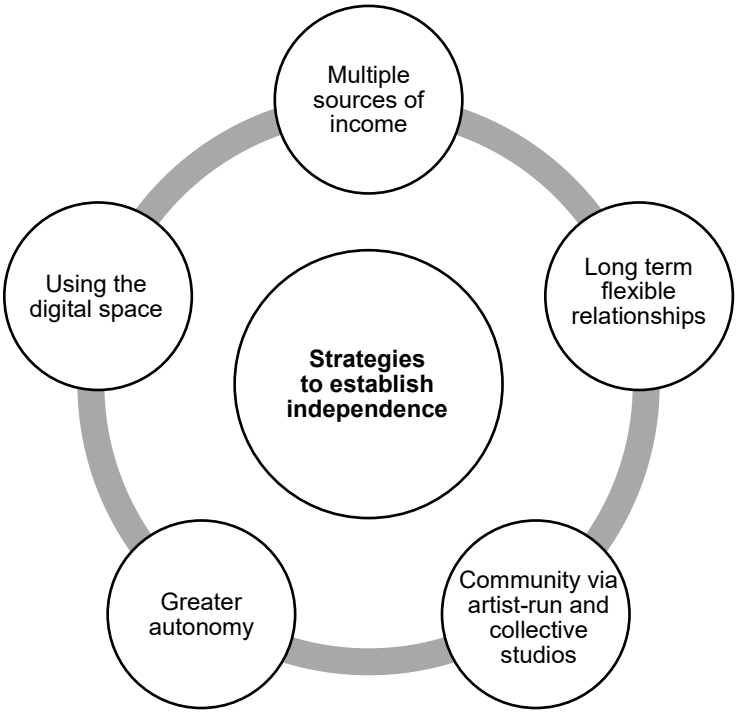


Figure 6.2. Strategies used by independent artists to circumnavigate established art world structures and establish independent art practices with greater autonomy.

6.6.1 Generating multiple sources of income

In the physical field of art, artists have devised strategies to deal with challenges arising from established structures by taking on multiple roles and embracing flexibility. For example, many artists take jobs to remain financially viable while pursuing their art. This diversification

reflects a habitus attuned to precarity and the structural limitations of the Johannesburg art field, where opportunities for sustained income through art sales alone are limited. Nathan Vuuren describes this as "living two lives," meaning artists will teach or expand their skill sets in order to maintain their studio practices. Roxy Kaczmarek and Bevan De Wet, for instance, both function as printmakers in professional print workshops that collaborate with other artists. These activities generate economic capital while simultaneously building social capital through professional networks and cultural capital through skill development and collaborative practice.

Another strategy involves establishing professional studio practices to facilitate engagement with collaborators and audiences, managing enquiries about their work, and creating opportunities for direct contact with artists. Artists have also established or become involved in alternative spaces where they can develop their skills, expand their networks outside of traditional structures, and focus on community engagement and experimentation rather than prioritising commercial success. By extending their activities beyond their own studio practice, artists create alternative pathways for accumulating the resources needed to sustain their creative work, thereby lessening their dependence on gallery representation for financial security.

6.6.2 Establishing long-term but flexible relationships

Several independent artists highlighted that working on a project-to-project basis offers some flexibility in dealing with galleries by allowing them to avail themselves of different opportunities. This option prioritises autonomy and adaptability over the concentrated symbolic capital offered by long-term institutional affiliation. While this model presents challenges in terms of maintaining continuity, it also fosters collaboration and can contribute to the accumulation of social capital within the art world. Phumulani Ntuli endorses this approach as a response to the imbalance between the number of artists and available spaces, noting that independent artists often have to seek out possible partners for collaboration. He agrees that while the project-to-project model has its limitations, it remains a practical strategy for working with collaborators.

However, as Ntuli suggests, the lack of continuity is a significant drawback of this model. Mbali Tshabalala offers a contrasting perspective, emphasising the importance of establishing sustainable long-term relationships with galleries and spaces for career development. Tshabalala argues that these enduring collaborations allow for more meaningful and strategic

career progression, providing artists with the opportunity to focus on the long-term trajectory of their practice rather than being constrained by the short-term nature of project-based work.

These perspectives again reflect the habitus of artists as shaped by their experiences and positions in the art world as well as by how they seek out value in their practice. For artists like Ntuli, working on a project-to-project basis may be influenced by a habitus that values flexibility, maintaining control and adaptability in times of limited resources and opportunities. In contrast, artists like Tshabalala, who prioritise long-term relationships, are positioning themselves within a habitus that values the accumulation of symbolic capital through sustained gallery representation and ongoing recognition. This approach also reflects a focus on critical engagement with one's work and its development over time. Artists therefore recognise the value of long-term collaborations and pursue opportunities with galleries, project spaces or curators through which they can have continuity in their practice. These could include working with multiple but selected collaborators in relationships that undermine the traditional gallery structure of having exclusive agreements with artists.

Several respondents expressed the belief that galleries play a crucial role in the art ecosystem, emphasising the significance of exhibiting work in established gallery spaces. Kayser, for instance, points out that being an independent artist does not preclude collaboration with galleries; rather, an artist's success – whether independent or affiliated with a gallery – depends on their artistic achievements and the networks they cultivate,[66] that is, their ongoing accumulation of cultural capital. Joni Brenner believes that "gallery spaces help build reputations and provide critical feedback, which benefits artists."[67] Regular exhibitions with a particular gallery can enhance an artist's visibility, enabling audiences to become familiar with their work and track their artistic development over time.[68]

6.6.3 Creating a greater sense of autonomy

There is also an ambition among independent artists to simulate the gallery role themselves. Respondents indicated that working as an independent allows an artist to become more self-sufficient in the sense of developing skills and using resources to perform functions that would

[66] Andrew Kayser, interview with author, Johannesburg, October 26, 2023.
[67] Joni Brenner, interview with author, Johannesburg, October 31, 2023.
[68] Ibid.

normally be offered and undertaken by a gallery.[69] These skills would include logistics, connecting with collectors directly, and navigating various aspects of the art world to gain practical experience. Such an approach enables the accumulation of cultural capital (through professional skills), social capital (direct relationships with collectors), and in some cases economic capital (retaining a greater share of sales).

By themselves undertaking every aspect of their practice, artists can accumulate cultural capital over time and eventually operate on the basis of wide industry experience that would prevent them from being taken advantage of.[70] Connecting with their audiences directly also allows artists to have greater autonomy, so that while growing their audience they can have more control over how their work is presented, disseminated and collected. A challenge in this respect is that their access to people is limited to whom they encounter and the projects they can undertake as individuals. Lebogang Mabusela notes that the symbolic capital held by established galleries often outweighs that of independent practitioners, with collectors tending to trust gallery-mediated sales more. This highlights the unequal distribution of legitimacy within the field, where recognition is still largely tied to institutional endorsement. Nevertheless, these self-managed approaches grant artists greater control over the presentation, dissemination, and interpretation of their work, aligning with a habitus that prioritises autonomy over institutional dependency.

Many independent artists are increasingly turning to alternative spaces and digital platforms to showcase their work, creating a more inclusive and diverse landscape in the field of art. These spaces often encourage experimental practices and provide a supportive environment for artists to explore their creative visions without the limits typically associated with commercial galleries**.**

6.6.4 Creating a community through artist-run spaces and collective studio spaces

The artists interviewed noted that affiliation with artist-run spaces or collaborative studio environments is common, as these spaces foster a sense of partnership and community among artists. Participation in artist-run spaces and collective studios can be understood as a strategy for creating alternative subfields within the broader art field. They serve as productive platforms for networking, skill-sharing and mutual support. In these spaces artists can

[69] Lebogang Mabusela, interview with author, Johannesburg, February 2023.
[70] Cinthia Sifa Mulanfa, interview with author, Johannesburg, November 21, 2023.

accumulate social capital through peer networks, cultural capital through skill-sharing and joint exhibitions, and occasionally symbolic capital when such spaces gain visibility within the dominant field. For example, Ntuli pointed out how artist-run spaces facilitate important discussions on topics such as pricing and offer platforms for workshops, exhibitions, and social engagement.[71] These environments enable artists to develop their practices collectively, rather than in isolation, an especially valuable experience for emerging and mid-career artists. Tshabalala emphasised how locations like Asisebenze Art Atelier support the production of work while also promoting the artists and expanding their reach through joint branding and promotional efforts.[72] These spaces are seen as alternatives to commercial galleries, where artists often face market-related pressures. Artist-run spaces and collectives prioritise artistic freedom and provide opportunities for career development, connections with collectors, and valuable in-studio showcases or alternative exhibition opportunities (respondents Hobbs, Kayser, Taylor, Tshabalala).

However, this approach to exhibiting does not work for all artists. Some older-generation artists like Jeremy Wafer, Richardt Strydom and Joni Brenner prefer the stability of long-term relationships with a single gallery, reflecting a habitus in line with structured institutional support and the symbolic security it provides. Wafer, who has exhibited at the Goodman Gallery for many years, exemplifies this perspective. Despite his long-standing relationship with Goodman Gallery, Wafer has never signed a formal contract with the gallery and their relationship exists and is maintained through their historical affiliation. When asked about this, Wafer claimed that having a solid support structure was an essential source of self-confidence for him. He acknowledged that he lacked the strong "hustling" skills that are important for independent artists.

For artists like Wafer, the intellectual and conceptual dimensions of their work are best served by having a stable relationship with a gallery that can provide the necessary support and structure. Strydom also believes that gallery representation is beneficial from the perspective of critical feedback, mentorship and the fostering of specific projects. In the view of these artists, gallery space allows them to focus on their artistic practice while the gallery handles the business aspects, such as career development and marketing and sales. This approach enables them to prioritise the conceptual and intellectual aspects of their work without the added burden of self-promotion and networking. Wafer and Strydom’s preference for a stable

[71] Phumulani Ntuli, written correspondence, December 2024.
[72] Mbali Tshabalala, interview with author, Johannesburg, October 23, 2023.

relationship with a single gallery or curator reflects how their habitus aligns with a more traditional, structured approach to exhibiting and building their career.

As independent artists continue to work outside traditional commercial frameworks, engaging in collaborative projects with other artists and collectives has become a key mechanism for growing cultural and social capital. Given the increasing prominence of collective studios and artist-run spaces in Johannesburg, I sought to find out whether artists perceive these spaces as competing with traditional art venues in creating opportunities, and to assess whether such spaces help artists gain various forms of capital. The findings show that many artists believe there is no competition between artist-run or collective studio spaces and traditional art venues such as galleries and museums. Ntuli emphasised that "all these spaces are necessary for the development of the art ecosystem and the growth of the Johannesburg cultural landscape."[73]

Collaborations between artists and collectives enable artists to organise their practices, promote their work, and establish direct connections with collectors and curators within a specific context. These collaborations can challenge existing norms, such as the exclusivity of gallery artists or the types of works displayed in commercial settings, by exploring new media and fostering a sense of community and shared purpose. One such initiative is *Art Under the Bed*, which is managed by artists rather than an external mediator (Kayser, Reid).

Art Under the Bed began as an artist-driven initiative in Cape Town and has recently expanded to Johannesburg. It thus involves a large community of artists and collectors across multiple cities enabling artists to build direct relationships with collectors which enhance their social capital. The works shown are often more accessible in scale and price, broadening the collector base and increasing market inclusivity. Additionally, artists participating in this initiative receive 90% of the sales value enhancing their economic capital, significantly higher than the 50-60% they usually earn when their work is sold through galleries. This arrangement reflects a more direct and equitable distribution of the economic capital generated by the artists' work. *Art Under the Bed* exemplifies how independent initiatives can reconfigure the distribution of capital within the field.

The approach of *Art Under the Bed* mirrors the transformation of the art field in nineteenth-century Paris, as described by White and White (1965), when the dominance of the Paris Salon

[73] Phumulani Ntuli, Written correspondence to author, August 12, 2023

was challenged by artists who began painting *en plein air*, bringing their work literally into the public domain. The restrictions of this new mode of painting – small genre works created outdoors – led to an increased demand for smaller, more accessible paintings, which were more affordable and thus easier to sell. Similarly, Art Under the Bed creates opportunities for artists to produce and sell more accessible, smaller-scale works that are likely to generate immediate income. This reflects a shift in the field, where the emphasis is on creating art that appeals to a new collector base while catering to the economic realities of both emerging artists and art buyers.

Furthermore, the initiative contributes to the democratisation of the art market by providing artists who might not fit into the traditional gallery system with a platform to gain recognition and sell their work. In doing so, it expands the field of art—not only by increasing the volume and diversity of work available, but also by broadening the pool of participants to include new collectors and emerging artists. Taken together, these strategies illustrate that in Johannesburg's art field, autonomy for independent artists is always relational rather than absolute, negotiated within, and shaped by, the very institutional and market structures they seek to circumvent.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic would further test and transform these strategies, accelerating the adoption of digital platforms and social media as vital spaces for sustaining visibility, expanding networks, and accessing new forms of capital.

6.7 Impact of COVID-19 on independent artist subjects

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on independent artists in Johannesburg has been both challenging and, paradoxically, liberating. The sudden disruption of the established art field forced a reconfiguration of the positions available to artists and other field participants and reshaped the conditions under which different forms of capital could be acquired and converted. With physical exhibitions and in-person networking suspended, the digital space – more specifically, social media – emerged as an alternative subfield with its own rules, hierarchies and opportunities for capital accumulation.

The artists interviewed indicated that the key social media platforms used for digital interaction and the online presentation of their work have been Instagram and Facebook. Initially conceived as a photo and video-sharing applications, these platforms have evolved into a space

that facilitates content creation through short video assemblages, Live discussion rooms, and integrated Shops, enabling artists to present, market and sell work directly to audiences. (Saxena 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, Instagram introduced several features aimed at enhancing connectivity amongst their users. In August 2020, the platform launched Reels, a short video format that offered a way to create and share 15-second videos on Instagram. Another key development was the integration of Messenger and Instagram, which enabled users to find people across platforms and increase engagement (Saxena 2020). This integration brought with it new features such as replying to specific messages, forwarding messages and various aesthetic changes. The platform also introduced Shops for businesses who were struggling to sell their products. Shops could also be used by artists to promote and sell their works directly through the platform.

Instagram Live videos, Live Rooms and similar tools became particularly important, enabling greater reach and facilitating forms of engagement that partially substituted for the physical gallery encounter. These tools enabled users to go live with multiple guests, expanding their reach. At this point, adding up to three people to participate in these sessions helped facilitate greater engagement (Saxena 2020). While Instagram and Facebook were available for the posting of image and video content prior to the pandemic, the updates on their features paired with the global reduction in physical contact and activity made for greater usability. Several key themes emerging from the interviews revealed how artists coped in the art world during this time.

Many artists noted a marked increase in digital activity, with a growing sense that the modes through which art could be displayed were becoming more plentiful and accessible. This reflects an increase in production through online engagement as well as a shift or expansion of artists' habitus to include their understanding of, and participation in the digital space. Richardt Strydom remarked, "I saw more peers and artists making work and putting it out there as the modes of display became more accessible." This indicates both an increase in art production and a shift in perspective to a greater awareness of the potential of online platforms.

In addition to the notable increase in users and activity on social media, artists explored the possibilities of selling their work online. Chloe Reid[74] described how she conceptualised a way to recalibrate her practice and sell affordable work online. This involved making quick

[74] Chloe Reid, online interview with author, February 7, 2024.

watercolour paintings which she would present in a pdf catalogue and upload to Instagram. This would then be distributed to her network of followers. Before the pandemic, Reid, like many artists, worked within a traditional gallery system where her art was exhibited and sold. Her watercolour strategy illustrates how she adapted her habitus, shaped by pre-pandemic engagement with the gallery field, to new digital conditions. In doing so, she converted digital social capital, accrued through her followers and online networks, into economic capital through direct sales—a clear demonstration of the habitus's capacity to evolve in response to shifting social and economic contexts.

Other respondents, including Nathan Vuuren and Cynthia Sifa Mulanga, reported that most of their sales were made online, highlighting the transformative impact of the digital space on the field of art. During the pandemic, artists actively experimented with selling online, some with great success.

Reid has continued her online sales strategy but notes that her sales during the pandemic surpassed those she has experienced since, even with the addition of her annual sale. This might be due to over-saturation of participation in the digital space, or perhaps a desire for buyers to return to more traditional modes of consumption. Reid herself comments that "the art world is sort of precious, and selling on Instagram could seem sort of trashy. And it does not have the same sort of gravitas as selling through an exhibition." This observation highlights a distinction between digital platforms, which cater to a broader, more popular audience, and the traditional gallery setting, which is often associated with elite culture and retains greater symbolic value. Andrew Kayser's remarks similarly reveal an awareness of the symbolic distinctions between participation with physical galleries and online participation:

> There are artists on Instagram who have become extremely successful financially but that to me almost seems to be just another game. There seems to be plenty of artists on Instagram that make not very good work but they would have a huge following and they are obviously selling quite well and good for them, but I guess I am not only interested in that. I don't just want to sell the work. I would like it to be acknowledged.

Kayser's attitude reflects a positioning towards the autonomous pole of cultural production, where symbolic capital, conferred by critical recognition and institutional endorsement, takes priority over the opportunities for rapid monetisation available in the heteronomous, market-oriented digital spaces. Reid and Kayser's observations suggest a tension between the

accessibility of online platforms, the availability of digital tools to reach a wider audience and sell works regardless of their standard, on the one hand; and, on the other, the desire to maintain the prestige that comes with traditional modes of presenting and selling through established galleries. As Andrew Kayser suggests, there is a perceived difference in symbolic value between selling works on Instagram and presenting them in a gallery. The latter offers prestige, cultural legitimacy and symbolic capital. The hierarchy characteristic of the art field is largely unaffected: digital platforms are seen as more accessible and popular, while traditional galleries maintain their elite status. This shows how different forms of capital are distributed unevenly across different fields and how artists must navigate these disparities. It also illustrates that the pandemic did not dissolve the field's power relations but rather shifted the sites of capital acquisition, forcing artists to negotiate between competing subfields with distinct rules of value.

The pandemic was a time of both constraint and opening up in the field of art. As traditional practices were disrupted, and galleries, artists, auction houses, and others moved online, many of the previously opaque operations of the art world became more transparent. Artists observed how galleries promoted their artists and projects online and realised that they could do the same. The pandemic accelerated the notion that artists can control their own practices and sales more directly. During the pandemic a new sense of agency and autonomy emerged among artists, as highlighted by Mbali Tshabalala:

> I think since the pandemic, a lot of artists have seen that a lot of what the gallery has been doing is stuff that they have been doing themselves through social media and the use of the internet. I think a lot of artists have taken ownership of their practice more than has been done in previous years, and I think that has been fast-tracked by the pandemic.

This view was echoed by Cinthia Sifa Mulanga, who noted a new awareness among artists of how to promote their work and even market it on their own terms:

> Because of the lockdown artists saw that they can sell online by themselves and they can make their own terms. And if their terms are not met they can try to do that on their own. I think it was a positive shift because in a way I saw that artists now do understand the work that galleries…do and they saw the type of work that they do and that was kind of a decision for some to rather do it on their own.

The perspectives articulated by Tshabalala and Mulanga reflect an expanded field of possibilities, a reimagining of what is attainable when traditional structures are temporarily destabilised.

Stephen Hobbs reflections also point to the limits of this shift. While living in Ireland at the start of the pandemic, he recounts how he slowly took to Instagram to connect with the existing audience in South Africa that he had physically developed over 25 years. What he found particularly difficult during this time was not being able to exert any personal charm on a potential buyer as interactions were always mediated through a sort of digital medium or technology platform. Hobbs observed that he had always been uncertain of the online world and its ability to produce meaningful connections in the digital space. His discomfort illustrates the friction between an established habitus rooted in face-to-face engagement and the disembodied, mediated forms of interaction characteristic of the digital subfield.

Despite such lingering insecurities about the use of the digital space, the pandemic can be understood as precipitating a moment of restructuring when digital platforms temporarily assumed greater importance in the distribution of capital and the organisation of artistic practice. It has, however, permanently altered the way in which independent artists engage with the art world and had a lasting effect on the potential of the digital space to enable gains of economic and social capital online. In the post-pandemic landscape, the digital space continues to be an important resource for artists who have rapidly adapted to its growing prominence. The following section analyses which strategies independent artists continue to use in the digital space and what opportunities these create for artists outside of traditional gallery structures.

6.8 The use of digital platforms by independent artists

Artists have increasingly recognised the digital landscape as a valuable tool for research, networking with galleries and curators, and enhancing the distribution and visibility of their work. This reflects a structural shift in the field of cultural production, where online platforms now function as a parallel subfield to the traditional, physically bounded art world. Among the platforms most frequently utilised by the artists surveyed are Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn, and mass mailing and instant messaging services such as MailChimp and WhatsApp. Many artists engage with collectors via WhatsApp and manage online mailing lists to share updates about new work and exhibitions (respondents De Wet, Kayser and Tshabalala). Artists navigate this subfield by developing strategies to accumulate digital social capital, primarily

through online engagement and convert that into economic capital through sales or into symbolic capital through recognition from peers, curators and critics as well as opportunity. In Bourdieu's terms, the digital space functions as a key marketplace of visibility in the digital subfield, where artists can produce and circulate content that positions them in relation to others, and where recognition is mediated by metrics such as followers, likes, and shares. This quantification of visibility constitutes a form of capital within the digital subfield, although it does not always translate into symbolic legitimacy in the dominant (traditional) art field.

The artists chosen for interview all indicated that they had developed multi-platform digital strategies to enhance the visibility of their work. All 17 artists indicated that Instagram was their most used platform, and all but one confirmed that they made use of more than one platform. Andrew Kayser, for instance, uses a combination of Instagram and communication platforms such as Mailchimp and Whatsapp, while Stephen Hobbs makes use of Instagram and, more recently, LinkedIn to encourage dialogue about his art.

The table below identifies the artists surveyed, the digital platforms they utilise, and their Instagram follower counts. Instagram stands out as a common denominator and the most frequently used platform.

Artists	Digital platforms artists utilise	Number of Followers on Instagram up until August 2025
J. Brenner	Instagram, website	1348
B. de Wet	Instagram, Website, Latitudes Online	2942
S. Hobbs	Instagram, LinkedIn, Facebook	2206
R. Kaczmarek	Instagram, Facebook, Website	1558
A. Kayser	Instagram, email, newsletter, online catalogue, Latitudes Online	4678
B.Khoza	Instagram, Latitudes Online	20 200
L. Mabusela	Instagram, Facebook, threads, online catalogue	2833
Q. Maswana	Instagram,	14 500
C. Mulanga	Instagram, Latitudes Online	6816
P. Ntuli	Instagram, online catalogues, website, Latitudes Online	2184
C Reid	Instagram, website, newsletter	1942
J. Singer	Instagram, newsletter	15 600
J. L. Stegmann	Instagram, Facebook, Latitudes Online, Newsletter	2665
R. Strydom	Instagram, Facebook, Blog	1974
M. Tshabalala	Instagram, Latitudes Online	2922
MJ. Turpin	Instagram	3971
N. Vuuren	Instagram	1384

Table 6.1. Independent artists and their presence on digital platforms

Various themes relating to the use of the digital space by independent artists emerged from the interviews. The digital space plays an important role in creating opportunities, especially for artists who have no other avenues.

6.8.1 Creating visibility and growing audiences

As argued in Chapter 4, social media forms a distinctive subfield within the broader field of art in Johannesburg. This subfield has increasingly become a crucial conduit for artists to reach audiences beyond traditional gallery spaces and engage with global networks. Online platforms allow artists to cultivate a specific following, share content, and grow their digital social capital. If artists traditionally built social capital by physically engaging in exhibitions, networking with

gallerists, and attending art fairs, in the digital space they follow similar strategies by investing time on platforms, following relevant profiles, and engaging with other users through likes, comments, and shares.

The artists interviewed in this study predominantly use multiple social media platforms, with Instagram emerging as the dominant space for connecting with peers, galleries, curators and potential collectors. By following profiles, sending direct messages, and sharing professional updates, artists enact forms of network-building that aim to increase their visibility within both the digital subfield and, potentially, the dominant physical field of art. The act of curating one's feed—posting images of works, studio practices, and exhibition invitations—reflects a conscious attempt to accumulate symbolic capital in the digital realm, which can later be converted into recognition in the traditional field. M.J. Turpin confirmed that regularly posting images, sharing exhibition invitations, and showcasing professional photographs of works and studio setups are effective strategies for building digital visibility. Turpin added that artists could create more traction with their audiences by conducting interviews and posting stories, and that sustained engagement could signal relevance and authority.

With regards to the power of the digital space to access audiences, Stephen Hobbs suggested that social media functions as a dynamic site for the exchange and accumulation of social capital:

> I think the audience has cumulatively grown through the interest areas of my practice that are of interest to those particular groups of people and followers, and so you cross-pollinate, you cross-connect and sometimes you can be very productive in sharing information that appears new to you but isn't to others and vice versa. It's a really interesting trading space in that way: it's quite lightweight (well for me it's lightweight) because I'm not aggressively marketing a product in that environment, but I still find that the audience that I enjoy online comes from all corners of the planet and that's just the convenience of an online culture.

Hobbs's idea of a "convenient online culture" points to one of the digital field's structural advantages: its capacity to transcend the geographic and institutional barriers that traditionally constrain capital accumulation. Hobbs describes the digital space as a "trading space" that enables him to engage with a diverse and global audience, emphasising the expansive reach of the online field. Hobbs notes the process of "cross-pollination" or "cross-connection," which refers to how different interest areas intersect and create new

connections, allowing for the accumulation of social capital through an ever-expanding network of followers. This points to the idea that success in the digital field is often defined by the ability to engage and expand one's network, as well as the ability to circulate and exchange knowledge that resonates with a wide audience.

Hobbs also mentions the "lightweight" nature of this trading space, indicating that he does not aggressively market his work or presence in the way some other artists might. This reflects a more gradual, organic accumulation of social capital, in contrast to how, say, a more commercial or strategic approach might set about it. Hobbs seems to position himself in a relatively passive role within the digital field, allowing connections to form naturally through shared interests and ideas, rather than through active or forceful promotion of his products or artistic identity.

The notion of a "convenient online culture" is key here – Hobbs emphasises how the global reach of the digital space allows him to connect effortlessly with an audience from all corners of the world. This convenience not only broadens the scope of engagement but also makes the accumulation of social capital less dependent on traditional, physical locations or the institutional structures that typically govern the art world, such as galleries or art fairs. Hobbs is in effect navigating the digital field and accumulating social capital in a way that is not subject to the pressures that come with traditional forms of art world validation. This speaks to the notion of creating a digital habitus, one that adapts to the requirements of the digital space and extracts from it certain benefits and resources that may differ from their equivalents in the physical sphere. Hobbs's engagement with his audience in the digital space demonstrates how the rules of the digital field operate differently from those of the traditional art world. While he does not actively market himself in the same way, his ability to share ideas and connect with others across a global network offers a good illustration of what is attractively fluid and expansive about the digital space.

Another important component of audience engagement is participation in online discovery platforms or marketplaces, such as Latitudes Online. In addition to their independent postings, artist respondents indicated that they collaborated with Latitudes Online by uploading their work onto the platform. Latitudes Online has also utilised its platform, along with other digital tools, to discover new independent artists who could benefit from mentorship.

An example of this strategy can be seen in the case of Cinthia Sifa Mulanga, who gained a significant audience through her inclusion in the online Artist Proof Lockdown Collection

auction during the COVID-19 pandemic. When asked about the success of her work, Mulanga explained:

> There was this lockdown series that I did with Artist Proof, where I am definitely sure I got visibility from. I did a series of drawings, but there was just one specific piece that was selected for the lockdown collection. A lot of people were interested in that work, and a few art critics also wrote about it. Then there was also Latitudes. I think the combination of those two platforms created really good exposure for me. From there, other projects started to come.

This illustrates the power of digital platforms, not only in increasing visibility but also in generating new opportunities and collaborations for independent artists. Mulanga's case highlights how digital engagement can produce a ripple effect, where initial exposure creates a new audience and leads to new professional working relationships. Since spotting her work on the Lockdown Collection auction, Latitudes Online has become an important collaborator and connector for Mulanga. According to the artists, Latitudes acts as a mentor and "agent," facilitating relationships or partnerships initiated by other galleries, collaborators or brands.

6.8.2 Using social media sites as a virtual gallery space

Artists have increasingly utilised social media platforms and personal websites to present curated selections of their work, sometimes in the form of online exhibitions. This shift reflects the evolving dynamics of the art world, where galleries and physical spaces no longer have total control over the visibility of artworks and are challenged by the emergence of the digital subfield. Online exhibitions have become an accessible, adaptable, and frequent alternative to traditional physical shows, offering a wider reach and greater flexibility. They offer new opportunities for artists to be seen and engage with larger audiences than ever before. However, as Lucy McGarry observes,[75] curation is still essential in the digital realm, as selecting and presenting works thoughtfully continues to be a key factor in connecting with collectors and audiences.

Platforms such as Instagram, which prioritise visual content, have become increasingly important as virtual exhibition spaces. Although Instagram limits the presentation format to a

[75] Lucy McGarry, interview with author, Johannesburg Dec 11, 2023.

grid of nine visible squares, many artists have found creative ways to navigate this structure, constructing a visual narrative around their work. Roxy Kaczmarek observed that various platforms speak to various audiences and should be used judiciously:

> I think each social media platform, especially on Instagram, is like its own digital gallery and it allows an artist to present their work. Depending on an artist's success with marketing, this could be more or less lucrative. It definitely allows for a broader reach of showing but there is still something important in the tangibility of seeing physical work.

Kaczmarek concedes there remains something inherently valuable about experiencing physical artworks in person that guarantees the continuing relevance of tangible exhibitions. Qhamanande Maswana[76] affirmed the value of social media as an alternative gateway into the field for those who lack regular access to high-profile galleries, art fairs, or other sites of consecration. He noted that:

> I started to share my work online. I was painting in the studio but I was sharing it on social media because that is where most eyes are… If you don't get visitors, or you don't go out there or know many people, or don't have platforms like exhibitions or art fairs for people to see and engage with your work, then you have to use social media platforms. To get more eyes and attention. People started to notice me and approach me for opportunities – all from these platforms.

His experience illustrates the capacity of digital platforms to provide artists with opportunities to accumulate social capital through expanded networks, and to convert this into professional opportunities.

The shift toward online exhibitions – as discussed by McGarry – suggests that platforms like Artsy or Instagram can help galleries and artists reach audiences far beyond what traditional, physical exhibitions can achieve. Additionally, the digital realm offers opportunities for artists to present their work in innovative formats such as 3D tours. Banele Khoza comes to mind as a pioneer in original digital strategies to overcome the obstacles of access and broader reach in the global art field. Khoza was one of the first artists and gallery owners to embrace 3D digital

[76] Qhamanande Maswana, interview with author, Johannesburg Dec 4, 2024.

tour technology to maximise the geographic reach of his presentations. 3D tour technology allows exhibitions to stay active long beyond openings and customary cycles and also enables broader viewership, as anyone who has access to the gallery's online platforms where the tour is loaded can view the exhibition. Khoza notes that their use of 3D Tours is at the same time building an archive of digital files that is permanently available for people to visit. His use of this technology demonstrates a strategic mobilisation of cultural capital, as he has not only expanded his audience geographically but also built a digital archive—a form of symbolic capital with potential long-term value as a record of artistic practice.

Khoza's digital strategies further illustrate the role of habitus in shaping how artists engage with online platforms. Khoza's disposition towards developing an online presence reinforces how the digital space offers an artist the opportunity to connect personally with their audience about their practice, encouraging them to invest in a narrative, and not necessarily only to sell them a product.[77] In this way, Khoza works to accumulate symbolic capital by positioning himself as an artist of substance and consequence to the audience, thus reinforcing his standing in both the digital and physical art worlds.

Khoza thus highlights the importance of cross-pollination between the physical and digital spaces, to enhance an artist's reach and opportunities by drawing on the network and resources of their connected community. The strategic use of digital platforms as exhibition or viewing spaces allows artists not only to expand their audiences but also to negotiate new forms of legitimacy. The accumulation of digital social capital through followers, engagement, and online collaborations can be converted into economic capital through direct sales, and into symbolic capital when online visibility leads to recognition from established institutions. The interplay between fields shows that the digital and physical art worlds are increasingly interdependent, with artists leveraging both to maintain and enhance their position in the broader field of cultural production.

6.8.3 Establish direct relationships using social media platforms

The broad visibility of artists on social media enables them to build direct social capital through relationships with audiences, collectors and other users. Collectors can inquire about work directly from the artist, which effectively democratises access to art. Artists have worked

[77] Cotterell, Gary. "Artist Banele Khoza Embraces the Brave New World of Art with Online 3D Tours." *Wanted Online*, May 26, 2020. https://www.wantedonline.co.za/art-design/2020-03-24-artist-banele-khoza-embraces-the-brave-new-world-of-art-with-online-3d-tours/.

towards fostering their own networks through physical and online networking, mostly through the use of Instagram (respondents Mulanga, Ntuli and Strydom).

Ntuli indicated that he uses his online presence to receive inquiries about his work and from this, he has compiled and maintains an email list of contacts with whom he has an ongoing connection. This reflects an intentional accumulation of social capital within the digital subfield, which has the potential to be converted into economic capital through sales or symbolic capital through recognition and visibility. As galleries and artists move more into the online space, they benefit from access to a much larger pool of potential buyers. This can involve digital art fairs and livestream auctions. However, the sheer volume of content on platforms like Instagram means that, as Roberta Coci points out, the digital presence must be consistent and engaging to stand out, involving an adaption of their habitus to the competitive conditions of the digital field.

The open access to networks can highlight tension in the field between independent self-promotion and institutional affiliation and processes. Anthea Buys[78] comments from a gallery perspective on this process, addressing the attitude that some artists may have:

> Collectors would first contact the artists via Instagram and the artists will refer then to us and I guess that process for some artists seem frustrating because they are kind of thinking 'well this guy has just found me on Instagram, why am I referring him to the gallery'… Some artists have the temptation to undercut the gallery when they are selling online because I think there is financial anxiety that if they offer the stuff at the same price as the gallery there would be no incentive for the collector to buy from them, so I think collectors drive that as well.

The openness of access online does not thus resolve the complexities of maintaining professional practice in the digital space, or diminish the importance of ethical practice. While the ease of direct sales through social media creates an immediate and appealing option for artists, but it also brings into question the role of galleries in supporting the artist's career and the extent to which direct sales can compromise that relationship. For some artists, the expectation that they should refer buyers back to the gallery can feel restrictive, especially when financial pressures lead to the temptation to bypass the gallery entirely by offering lower prices

[78] Anthea Buys, interview with author, Johannesburg Dec 14, 2024.

directly to collectors. Here, the decision whether to undercut a gallery reflects a negotiation between different forms of capital: the immediate gain of economic capital from a direct sale versus the long-term symbolic capital that may accrue from maintaining a strong institutional affiliation. This dynamic illustrates how the rules of the field remain operative regardless of easy access and opportunities in the digital space. While artists are able to capitalise on the resources of the digital space, it is important for them to maintain social and other symbolic forms of capital in the physical field of art to gain long-term recognition and institutional recognition through which they can accumulate cultural capital.

6.8.4 Producing a narrative/ building a brand

The process of building an online following can be enriched by the development of a narrative or brand identity around an artist's practice. This is comparable to the situation of independent artists in the music industry, who report that developing a personal brand or persona is crucial in the digital space, and that this often involves creating a quality of authenticity. Communicating genuine personal narratives to audiences captures significant public attention, as people are eager to connect with the artist on a personal level. This communication is closely tied to consistent and frequent interactions on social media.

Having a distinctive presence online is an important strategy in the competitive social media arena. In Bourdieu's terms, this might be characterised as developing a digital habitus that enables the artist to adopt new skills, aesthetic sensibilities and strategies for producing and sharing their work. Chloe Reid[79] indicates that participating in the digital space as an artist is to "develop a sort of narrative outside of your own space but it's almost independent of you."

An artist who has been particularly successful at achieving this is Banele Khoza. Khoza's approach to social media exemplifies the concept of digital habitus, as it highlights how an artist's practice, identity, and engagement with their audience are shaped by the digital environment. Khoza's success lies in his ability to merge his artistic practice with a personal narrative, using social media not just as a platform for promoting his work, but as a space for personal storytelling and engagement. His habitus, shaped by the digital space, allows him to operate with an awareness of the need for constant engagement and connection with his audience.

[79] Chloe Reid, interview with the author, online, February 2024.

In this regard, Khoza's approach is both intentional and strategically shaped by the norms of digital platforms. By regularly posting personal stories alongside professional updates, Khoza reflects a trend in which visibility and personal connection are seen as integral to an artist's success. His practice on social media is indicative of a digital habitus in which artists are increasingly required to cultivate personal brands and interact with their audience daily to maintain relevance and engagement. This daily cultivation of an online identity is not merely promotional; it functions as an ongoing process of converting social capital into symbolic capital, enhancing his reputation while broadening his network of potential collectors, curators, and collaborators.

Anthea Buys's reflection on her experience as a follower of Khoza reveals how his digital habitus fosters a sense of connection and intimacy. She commends the appeal of Khoza's ability to blend personal and professional storytelling, suggesting that this practice humanises his artistic persona and strengthens his relationship with his followers (Buys 2008). Khoza's routine of daily posts reflects the growing necessity for artists continuously to maintain and develop their social media presence, shaping both their public image and their relationship with the audience in a manner that is now inseparable from their art practice. Khoza's strategy illustrates how cultivating a personal presence and narrative online can encourage a deeper sense of connection with audiences, establishing trust and engagement that go beyond the work itself.

6.8.5 Using digital platforms to research and identify trends

Another key advantage of the digital space for artists is its ability to help them discover emerging trends in the art world and assess public engagement with specific imagery or discourse. Artists can then refine and shape their visual output to align with current interests. This process is facilitated by following hashtags or utilising a platform's explore page, which showcases the most popular posts. Maswana's practice reflects this process, as he notes that since he began taking his art seriously, he has integrated the resources available in the digital space into his practice. As he explains: "From the moment I began to take my art seriously, I researched on Facebook, Instagram, and Google, where I observed the work of other artists. It was through this that I identified the type of artist I aspired to become."

Twice a year, Maswana targets specific regions – such as the United Kingdom or New York – and boosts his posts to reach users in those areas. This strategy, he explains, helps to grow his online presence: "That's how I feel I grow my reach, people will go find my profile and start following

me." Maswana thus demonstrates how artists can strategically use the digital space not only to gain insight into trends but also to expand their visibility and influence in the global art field.

6.8.6 Crowdfunding: A case study

Lebogang Mabusela, an emerging artist in Johannesburg, exemplifies how digital and independent strategies can create opportunities within the local art scene. Her approach highlights the power of digital social capital, which refers to the value derived from online networks and relationships that provide access to resources, information, and opportunities. Mabusela has strategically utilised digital platforms – particularly through her network and the sale of her artwork – to fund various artistic projects.

One of the standout examples of her digital social capital is her successful funding of a booth at the 2021 Turbine Art Fair. By leveraging her online presence, Mabusela was able to raise the necessary funds to participate in this prominent art fair under the title *Monotype Babe Curatorial*. Mabusela collaborated with several artists to create small-scale monotypes, which she printed herself. The *Monotype Babe Curatorial* served as a platform for her work and facilitated connections with other artists, one of whom sent her the application for the Turbine Art Fair. This illustrates how Mabusela's network functioned as a vital resource, not only providing access to opportunities but also enabling her to fund projects independently.
To raise the R10,000 required for the booth, Mabusela launched a sale of her available works on Instagram. Her decision was directly influenced by her understanding of the digital space as a valuable tool for engaging with her audience. By tapping into her existing network of followers, Mabusela quickly generated the funds necessary to cover the booth costs. Instagram played a crucial role in amplifying her outreach, facilitating a direct connection between her and potential buyers.

The promotion of her sale by the Stevenson Gallery – despite her not being one of their artists – demonstrates the ripple effect of digital social capital. The Stevenson Gallery's larger network of followers undoubtedly increased Mabusela's exposure and attracted more attention to her fundraising effort. This shows how the sharing and redistribution of content within a broader network can exponentially boost visibility, creating opportunities that may not have been possible in a traditional, offline setting.

Mabusela's case illustrates that digital social capital is not merely about the number of followers or connections one has, but about using online networks strategically to access resources, information, and opportunities. By cultivating a strong digital presence and leveraging her

online community, Mabusela was able to bypass traditional barriers to entry into the art world, successfully funding her participation in the Turbine Art Fair and advancing her career.

Mabusela's success highlights the effect of the interplay between habitus, field, and capital in the digital age. Her habitus, informed by her access to a digital network alongside her independent entrepreneurial mindset, enabled her to identify opportunities to gain visibility in the physical field of art by decisively utilising resources in the digital space. The digital field provided new arenas in which to accumulate and convert capital, while still interacting with the traditional physical field of art, where symbolic recognition remains a powerful determinant of status. Mabusela's practice reveals how independent artists can reposition themselves in the field through strategic mobilisation of digital social capital, without abandoning the forms of institutional affiliation and symbolic legitimacy that remain central to long-term success.

6.9 The challenges of engaging with social media in the art world

Despite the opportunities for visibility, networking and engagement that the digital space offers artists, there are several significant drawbacks associated with the concentrated use of these platforms. A social media presence can increase exposure and help artists gain wider recognition, but it also raises the prospect of diluting an artist's symbolic capital, eroding exclusivity and undermining the perceived value of their work.

Maswana emphasised that, despite the value of social media platforms for artists, maintaining relationships with galleries remains crucial. He believes that for an artist to achieve long-term success in their career, working with galleries is essential, as they can place artists in spaces (such as international art fairs) that social media cannot. Maswana's recognition of the continuing importance of galleries, despite the growing influence of social media platforms, speaks to Bourdieu's concepts of *field* and *capital* within the art world. For Maswana, galleries represent a stable and consistent environment that not only provides economic capital through sales but also symbolic capital, by placing artists in an established cultural context that confers legitimacy and distinction.

The idea that artists must work with galleries to achieve longevity in their careers is in line with Bourdieu's notion that success in any *field* requires navigation of its specific rules and recognition from key players within it. Social media platforms, while valuable for reaching a broad audience, gaining visibility and facilitating sales, do not offer the same level of symbolic capital or prestige as gallery representation. In Bourdieu's terms, social media may help

accumulate social capital through increased visibility and networks, but lacks the *cultural capital* that galleries provide through their association with traditional forms of recognition.

Maswana suggests that being too transparent about one's practice or artworks on social media can have negative consequences. He explains that constantly sharing studio updates and revealing too much of the creative process can turn off serious art collectors or potential investors. In this way, Maswana exposes the possible tension between economic capital and symbolic capital in the use of social media. While the social media can be a valuable tool for artists to raise awareness of their work, excessive openness risks diluting the perceived value of artworks and alienating potential collectors. For those involved in the traditional art field, excessive digital transparency could diminish the symbolic capital of the artist, making them appear less serious or valuable. It might erode their symbolic capital, undermining the perceived rarity or mystique of the creative process, and rendering their work more common and less valuable.

An artist's relationship with digital transparency and its effects on their career is shaped by their habitus, their dispositions and their perspective. Artists immersed in the traditional *field* of galleries and high-profile exhibitions through their background or training at an art institution might have internalised the belief that exclusivity is a necessary factor in the value and desirability of their work. There is a distinction between artists whose practices reflect selective sharing and curated visibility in the art world and artists with a disposition more attuned to immediacy and commercialisation who accept social media as the primary platform for selling work.

M.J. Turpin also notes that there are fundamental differences between artists who just apply themselves to selling their work off Instagram and other digital platforms and artists who are focussed on using the platforms but also grow their careers by having exhibitions at galleries and participating in other important art world events such as art fairs. The distinction illustrates the parameters of Bourdieu's notion of field. Despite the expansion of the art world into digital spaces, it is still governed by traditional institutions like galleries and art fairs, which provide artists with the symbolic validation that social media platforms alone cannot offer. Artists who combine their digital presence with involvement in these institutional spaces can accumulate both social and symbolic capital.

By engaging in established and 'consecrated' art events and exhibitions, these artists position themselves within a field of power and recognition that reinforces their cultural legitimacy and

prestige. In contrast, artists who focus solely on sales and producing content for social media are operating primarily within a field where *social capital* is more easily accessible but less connected to formal recognition in the field of art. As a result, while these artists may achieve economic success, they may struggle to accumulate the same level of *symbolic capital,* which often requires validation from more traditional art institutions.

Regarding social connections made in the digital space, Stephen Hobbs had this to say:

> Social media platforms play a role in fostering some level of social connection or cohesion, but generally, I think it's quite superficial in my experience, because I just can't tolerate too many perspectives from too many individuals in the online space … there is so much slippage in the social media space that the true exchange of dialogue, meaning, and value, I found, is inconsistent unless you are in very rigorous critical chat rooms.

Hobbs's perspective on the superficiality of social media connections further highlights the tension between obtaining social capital and the processes of 'consecration' or achieving professional stature in the field of art. While social media provides the potential for broad *social capital*, these connections may lack depth or consistency, making them less meaningful in terms of establishing genuine cultural or intellectual value. Hobbs suggests that without engaging in more focused, rigorous conversations ("critical chat rooms"), social media interactions risk remaining shallow and lacking the *cultural capital* that comes from deeper, and more substantive exchanges within the art *field*.

Other challenges arising from the digital landscape include copyright control. For instance, Ntuli expresses scepticism about social media as a primary space for presenting artworks. He cites problematic terms of service and policies that may not sufficiently safeguard artists' intellectual property: "I don't really strongly believe in social media as a platform for presenting my work, reason being that the terms of service and the policies put in place on social media do not protect the intellectual production of the artists."

6.10 Shifts in the field of art in Johannesburg

According to the data collected from artists and practitioners, there have been significant shifts in the power dynamics within the Johannesburg art world. Artists' use of the digital space has essentially transformed the roles of all acting participants in the field of art and the dynamics among them.

One of the most notable shifts, especially since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, has been towards self-representation. Artists are increasingly taking control of their careers and negotiating the terms of their collaboration with galleries. This marks a significant departure from the traditional role of galleries as gatekeepers and dominant decision-makers for artists. By acquiring new forms of cultural capital (digital literacy, marketing skills, and access to global networks), artists are increasingly able to participate in decision-making processes that once rested exclusively with institutions. Artists are now more informed, empowered, and strategic in their interactions with galleries, with the digital space playing a major role in enabling this change.

Tshabalala observes that artists have become more proactive in negotiating consignment agreements. No longer passively accepting the terms offered by galleries, they are asking questions about what galleries can offer in return for representing them. This shift in power is acknowledged by gallerist Julie Taylor, who notes that more artists are seeking independence:

> There has been a shift in the way that artists work with galleries, and I think this shift is more positive for the artist because they can be better informed. They can do their own research and aren't as easily misled as they might have been in the past. With access to more information, they are able to make more informed decisions, which I think is very positive for the artists.

This strategic repositioning reflects a shift in habitus, as artists internalise a new set of dispositions shaped by their knowledge of and experience in the digital field. This shift further reflects a broader transformation within the field of art in Johannesburg, where power and control are being redistributed. The once clear hierarchy that positioned galleries as the central, authoritative force in the primary market is being challenged. As the habitus shifts for both artists and galleries, artists are gaining more autonomy and agency and reshaping the relationships defining the field itself.

Taylor notes that the changes occurring are not limited to the position of galleries but extend to the entire field, where all participants – artists, galleries, collectors, and institutions – are looking for ways to innovate, often using the digital space. She points out that gatekeeper roles are not the only ones evolving; the entire market has been disrupted. She mentions a specific example: auction houses, traditionally seen as the domain of secondary sales, have started selling primary works outside of their traditional auction settings and even taking booths at art fairs to make direct sales. This development, in addition to the possibilities offered by engagement with the digital space, challenges the traditional role of galleries, which have

historically had the power to decide where and how primary works were introduced into the art world. The result is a more fragmented, competitive market where capital is being circulated across multiple points of entry rather than being controlled by a select few.

The rise of the digital space has significantly democratised access to art. It has enabled greater transparency, creating opportunities for artists to engage with global audiences, showcase their studios, and directly communicate their practices. Commercial galleries are increasingly sharing pricing information and offering e-commerce options on their websites. This shift has led to a more fluid art world where players from all sectors are actively involved in the negotiation and circulation of social and economic capital.

6.11 Conclusion

This chapter has addressed several of the key objectives of this research, expanding the definition of an "independent artist" within the context of the field of visual art, particularly in Johannesburg, by reference to the perspectives and practices of the artists involved. Drawing on the themes emerging from the interviews, the chapter has provided in-depth insight into independent artists in Johannesburg, their perceptions of the art world and their engagement with various social media platforms. This insight contributes to an evolving definition of "independent" artists, reflecting the shifting dynamics in the contemporary art field.

The chapter first outlined the individual characteristics of the artists who participated in this study, providing a sense of their social, cultural, and professional backgrounds. This contextualisation is crucial, as it situates the artists within the broader field of art in Johannesburg. It reveals how their personal habitus intersects with their approach to art production and distribution and the several structural forces in the art world.

The chapter then examined the profound impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the field, focusing on how artists adapted to the sudden restrictions placed on traditional forms of exhibition and sales. Drawing on Bourdieu's concept of capital, the pandemic highlighted the precariousness of traditional art world structures when access to galleries, fairs, and physical exhibitions is curtailed. In their response, artists demonstrated remarkable agility and flexibility by leveraging social media platforms as alternative spaces to cultivate social capital, gain visibility, and expand their networks. Through these digital engagements, artists were able to negotiate a favourable position in the field, accessing a global audience while simultaneously preserving their local identity and relevance.

The chapter has also provided an analysis of the strategies that independent artists employ in the digital space. By strategically engaging with social media platforms, artists were able to accumulate economic and digital social capital. The platforms enabled increased exposure and accessibility, permitting artists to engage directly with collectors, curators, and galleries without relying on traditional pathways of engagement or intermediaries. Some leveraged their online social capital into tangible opportunities for exhibitions, collaborations, and sales.

However, as the chapter highlights, the growing role of the digital space is not without its challenges. The tension between maintaining artistic authenticity and navigating the demands of digital visibility reflects a broader dilemma in how habitus is being reshaped by the digital field. From critically engaging with the impact of digital technology on the field of art in Johannesburg, it has become clear that the digital space has both enabled and challenged independent artists and broader art world structures.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has demonstrated that independent artists in Johannesburg have effectively used digital platforms – particularly social media – to create new opportunities beyond the traditional gallery system between 2020 and 2024. Johannesburg was chosen as the focus primarily because of my own access, knowledge and participation in this particular field of art, where the interplay of habitus, field, and capital can be observed in sharp relief. In addition, as a city shaped by the legacies of colonialism and apartheid, and marked by ongoing socio-economic inequalities, Johannesburg provides a specific context in which to examine how independent artists navigate, challenge, and sometimes reinforce existing structures of power in the art world.

The study has made an original contribution to the notion of what it means to be an independent visual artist, specifically in the field of art in Johannesburg. The study shows how local socio-political history, the structure of Johannesburg's art market, and the rapid expansion of digital platforms intersect to produce a distinctive set of strategies, constraints, and opportunities. The findings suggest that this city's historical legacy of exclusionary art institutions, combined with the growing independent art community, make it an intriguing site for studying how artists convert and accumulate different forms of capital in both physical and digital art fields.

The conclusion reached is that independent artists are increasingly moving away from the traditional institutional model of single-gallery representation. Instead, they are seeking autonomy in their practice, cultivating long-term yet flexible relationships with collaborators, and taking control over the terms of their interaction with other art world protagonists and institutions. The independent artists interviewed also emphasised the value of being able to produce work outside the commercial pressures of Johannesburg's art market.

The findings underscore the transformative impact of digital platforms, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, which significantly accelerated online engagement in the art world. During that period, the only engagement possible for artists was to connect, network, produce and sell online. Since the COVID-19 lockdowns, independent artists in Johannesburg have gone back to physical participation in the art world while continuing to harness social media and other digital tools to share their work, engage with global audiences, and develop their professional networks. Artists have found ways to generate sustainable income through focused strategies such as crowdfunding, distributing digital catalogues, and selling their work on platforms like

Instagram. These digital avenues not only provide financial support but also facilitate direct relationships between artists and their audience, giving them greater control over their practices and career trajectories. The research suggests that because of the ongoing development of technologies, the possibilities for new strategies and practices in the field of art are open-ended.

Through a qualitative analysis of the data collected from interviews with independent artists, the study concludes that social media and other digital platforms have become crucial tools enabling independent artists to expand their reach, connect with audiences, and promote their practices outside the confines of the conventional gallery system. One of the most significant findings concerns artists' accumulation of *digital social capital* in this space, which endows them with greater autonomy in the field. By using social media to build direct connections with followers, collectors, and other art world participants, artists no longer have to rely solely on traditional institutional or gallery-driven partnerships and can now select collaborators and partners on the basis of personal inclination and professional interest. That artists prefer to maintain their independence while negotiating with institutions has prompted galleries to adopt a more collaborative and less restrictive approach.

Nevertheless, despite the growing autonomy enabled by the digital space, the research also shows that the cultural and symbolic capital associated with traditional galleries and institutions remains a valuable resource in the field of art. While digital platforms provide access to global networks, increase awareness, and assist in the distribution of work, galleries continue to play a critical role in endorsing artists and providing them with significant cultural capital. Endorsement by prestigious institutions not only reinforces an artist's reputation within the art world but also facilitates access to resources and opportunities that are difficult to achieve solely through digital means. Thus, while digital platforms offer considerable empowerment, the intersection of traditional gallery structures and digital networks continues to shape and sustain the careers of independent artists.

In terms of Bourdieu's theory of capital, this study has shown how the digital space allows artists to acquire economic capital through the sale of works, and social capital through increased visibility and networking. But the findings also suggest that the digital space alone is insufficient for artists to accumulate the cultural capital necessary to elevate their careers. A hybrid approach, combining digital tools to generate income, establish personal networks, and gain visibility, alongside traditional gallery exhibitions where artists can accumulate cultural capital, appears to be the most effective strategy for success in the Johannesburg art field.

Moreover, while digital platforms have democratised access to artistic opportunities, they have also introduced new power dynamics within the field. Galleries, auction houses, and independent artists must all find ways of navigating these shifts. Roles and relationships within the field are being reconfigured as new forms of capital, such as digital social capital, emerge, and traditional forms of cultural capital are challenged. Yet despite all this disruption, traditional institutions remain influential in accumulating and distributing cultural capital and continue to play a significant role in the overall success of artists within the global art market.

This research suggests that the shift towards digital platforms in Johannesburg's art world must also be understood within the context of the city's social and political history. Johannesburg, as a site marked by its colonial and apartheid history and subsequent socio-economic inequalities, has always been a place of dynamic cultural exchange, tension, and transformation. The rise of independent artists and their increasing engagement with digital platforms in the post-apartheid period can be seen as a response to the historically exclusionary practices of the traditional art world. Independent cultural production and the use of the digital space allow artists to assert their autonomy and agency, bypassing the gatekeeping mechanisms that continue to limit access to the art field. How artists utilise online platforms and how the new digital practices interact with Johannesburg's broader socio-political landscape, have to be seen as part of an ongoing process of negotiating and redefining artistic identities within a constantly evolving environment.

I must again acknowledge that my dual position within the art world – as both a gallery director and an independent artist practising in Johannesburg – has inevitably influenced the design and execution of this research. I am privileged to have had an insider's perspective on the dynamics of the art field in Johannesburg, conducive to a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities independent artists face, as well as of how their practices impact broader art world structures. However, this positioning also required a self-reflexive approach to the research process. My active engagement in the field granted me unique access to both artists and institutions, but it also meant that I presumably brought my own biases and assumptions to bear on the study.

As someone deeply involved in institutional structures, I am acutely aware of the ongoing significance of galleries in the accumulation of cultural capital. At the same time, I recognise the increasing role that digital platforms play in empowering artists to operate outside of traditional models of representation. This dual awareness has shaped how I analysed the

interaction between traditional and digital models of artistic practice, acknowledging both their interdependence and the tensions that arise as artists seek greater autonomy within a rapidly changing art landscape.

In conclusion, this research has illustrated that digital platforms and social media offer independent artists in Johannesburg a vital resource for self-promotion, income generation, and professional autonomy. These platforms have not only disrupted traditional models of art distribution but have also empowered artists to redefine their role in the art world. However, the research also suggests that while the digital space has democratised access to artistic opportunities, the role of galleries in accumulating and distributing cultural capital remains indispensable for the continued success of artists within the global art market. Independent artists in Johannesburg are therefore obliged to navigate a hybrid model where digital autonomy and traditional institutional capital intersect, creating new possibilities and challenges in the evolving landscape of the art world. The landscape has become more democratic, but also more fragmented and competitive.

While this study provides valuable insights into the ways in which independent artists in Johannesburg have utilised digital platforms to create new opportunities, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of the research. First, the study focuses on a limited sample of independent artists within Johannesburg, which means that the findings are context-specific and may not be fully representative of the broader spectrum of independent artists across South Africa or globally. The experiences and strategies discussed in this research are specific to the unique socio-economic and cultural context of Johannesburg, and further studies in different geographic locations could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how digital platforms function in other art fields. A further study could examine generational differences in artists' engagement with digital practices, and how these differences influence their ability to extend and adapt their habitus within the digital space. In sum, other studies could build upon these findings by incorporating a larger, more diverse sample of artists, exploring generational differences, and extending the analysis to other geographic regions and contexts. This would result in a broader understanding of how the digital space is reshaping the art world and the opportunities available to independent artists globally.

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