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Busy days for Brussels' collectors

By Gareth Harris

The launch of an offshoot of New York's Independent fair coincides with the latest Art Brussels



'Untitled', by Harold Ancart, at Clearing, Independent Brussels

Brussels' community of contemporary art collectors will face a double dose of temptation in the coming week. Wednesday sees the launch of Independent Brussels, a European offshoot of the New York fair that is cited as an alternative to its more traditional corporate counterparts on the circuit. Two days later the long-established Art Brussels gets its latest edition under way in a new downtown venue.

Independent's offering, led by executive director Laura Mitterrand, will feature more than 70 exhibitors, both blue-chip and younger dealers, along with four non-profits. They will take over the six-storey Vanderborcht building, a 1930s former department store in the city's historic centre.

The gallery list is eclectic, albeit with a strong local showing: there are 14 Belgian participants, including Micheline Szwajcer, who opened her first gallery in Antwerp in 1980, Clearing, a Brooklyn-based dealer with a Brussels townhouse base on Avenue Louise, and Mulier Mulier of Knokke, which is bringing works by artists including Carl Andre and Richard Long (price points are between €10,000 and €150,000). Belgian artist Jan De Cock will curate

FINANCIAL TIMES

a *Wunderkammer* presentation for Office Baroque — which runs two spaces in Brussels — featuring artists such as Tyson Reeder and Leigh Ledare.

Other galleries at the invitation-only fair include Vilma Gold of London, Glasgow's Mary Mary gallery, and Gavlak Gallery of Los Angeles, which is showing a selection of new works by Judith Eisler, including the 2015 drawing "Madonna" (price: \$10,000).

Independent, founded in 2010 in Manhattan by the dealers Elizabeth Dee and Darren Flook, was heralded as a utopian new model for art fairs with its emphasis on gallery co-operation and transparency. "There are no hierarchies between established and emerging artists and galleries," says Matthew Higgs, the fair's creative adviser and director of the non-profit organisation White Columns. "It is critical, for instance, that David Zwirner and Gavin Brown exhibit alongside an outsider art dealership from Berlin." Box-like booths are barred. "The key thing with the lay-out is the flow, the continuous movement between different ideas and platforms," Higgs adds.



'A Midsummer Night's Dream (after Shakespeare and Mendelssohn)' (2015), by Tim Rollins and KOS, at Maureen Paley, Independent Brussels

The veteran London-based dealer Maureen Paley regularly participates in the New York edition and is testing the water in Brussels. She believes that Independent chimes with other aspects of the city's cultural scene. "Since 2008, Brussels has also been home to Wiels [contemporary art centre], whose challenging programme is presented in a vast industrial space. Galleries such as Jan Mot, dépendance and Xavier Hufkens have helped along with many others to

create international programmes that are intelligent and rigorous with a conceptual edge.”

The city has also long boasted some substantial collectors, thanks in part to fortunes derived from industry and textiles. How they respond will determine the fate of the fledgling fair, though initial indications are positive.

Filiep and Mimi Libeert, key collectors based in Kortrijk, Flanders, say they are drawn to Independent’s “irreverent” style. The couple, who began acquiring contemporary art 40 years ago and boast early works by Franz West and Damien Hirst as part of their vast collection, cite the fair’s “improvised” approach to bringing together different galleries as key to its appeal.

Independent co-founder Dee is optimistic about the fair’s likely reception, and confident that last month’s terrorist attacks will not hinder the city’s burgeoning art scene. As well as next week’s fair, she has founded the Independent Régence, a gallery space located in a former print works near the Palace of Justice, where international dealers can mount temporary shows (she calls this intriguing new model a “gallery residency”).

“The collectors have a real sense of responsibility and stewardship,” she says. “The collecting community is a microcosm of the depth we see in New York, and the collectors here are real devotees of the fair there, so why not have a fair in Brussels that reflects collecting practice? This is a unique opportunity to highlight the inter-generational collecting and connoisseurship in the city.”

Faced with new competition, Art Brussels — founded as Art Actuel in 1968 — is understandably upping its game. Newly streamlined, with 141 galleries this year compared with 191 in 2015, the fair is moving to the Tour & Taxis building, an industrial customs house built in 1904. Katerina Gregos, the artistic director who is quitting after this edition, will present some compelling curatorial initiatives, including an exhibition of works from the collection of the late Belgian curator Jan Hoet.

Can the two fairs co-exist? Dee says: “People want to compare the two fairs, [but] there is little overlap and radically different approaches. We need to make sure that we keep an open dialogue with Art Brussels.” Gregos, meanwhile, comments: “Independent would not be here if it were not for Art Brussels, which has

FINANCIAL TIMES

invested long-term in attracting collectors and curators, and developing institutional relationships.”

Belgian collector Ronald Rozenbaum, who owns works by Ed Ruscha and Bruce Nauman, concurs. “Although some suggest that this is competition for Art Brussels, I believe that our city can support two strong art fairs,” he says. “The added focus will strengthen the art community and solidify this week as a key moment in the international art calendar.”

The city seems to be at a tipping point, although local art professionals bristle at the assumption that “Brussels is the new Berlin” — the next hyped-up art hotspot. “It is a very interesting, diverse city but there are no large institutions and everything mostly happens on a modest scale. We cherish the city precisely because it does not scream too loudly,” Gregos says.

Indeed, the city still has no large-scale modern or contemporary art museum. Regional and federal governments are wrangling over establishing such an institution; the Brussels regional authority, known as Brussels-Capital, plans to convert an Art Deco building north-west of the city centre, formerly owned by Citroën, into a contemporary art venue.

The heavyweight New York dealer Barbara Gladstone, who opened a gallery in Brussels in 2008, draws not entirely positive comparisons with other art hubs. “London seemed very daunting and a number of my artists are already represented by galleries there. Berlin is gallery-heavy; there are just too many and not enough of an audience. Brussels is, so far, not a trendy city — there is no real estate rush yet.”

Rozenbaum, however, emphasises the city’s affordability. “The city offers the same features which have attracted artists to other locations in the past: cheap rents, large spaces, good vibes, curious and welcoming collectors.” If the new fair line-up proves durable, that can only add to its appeal.

Independent Brussels, April 20-23, independenthq.com

Art Brussels, April 22-24, artbrussels.com