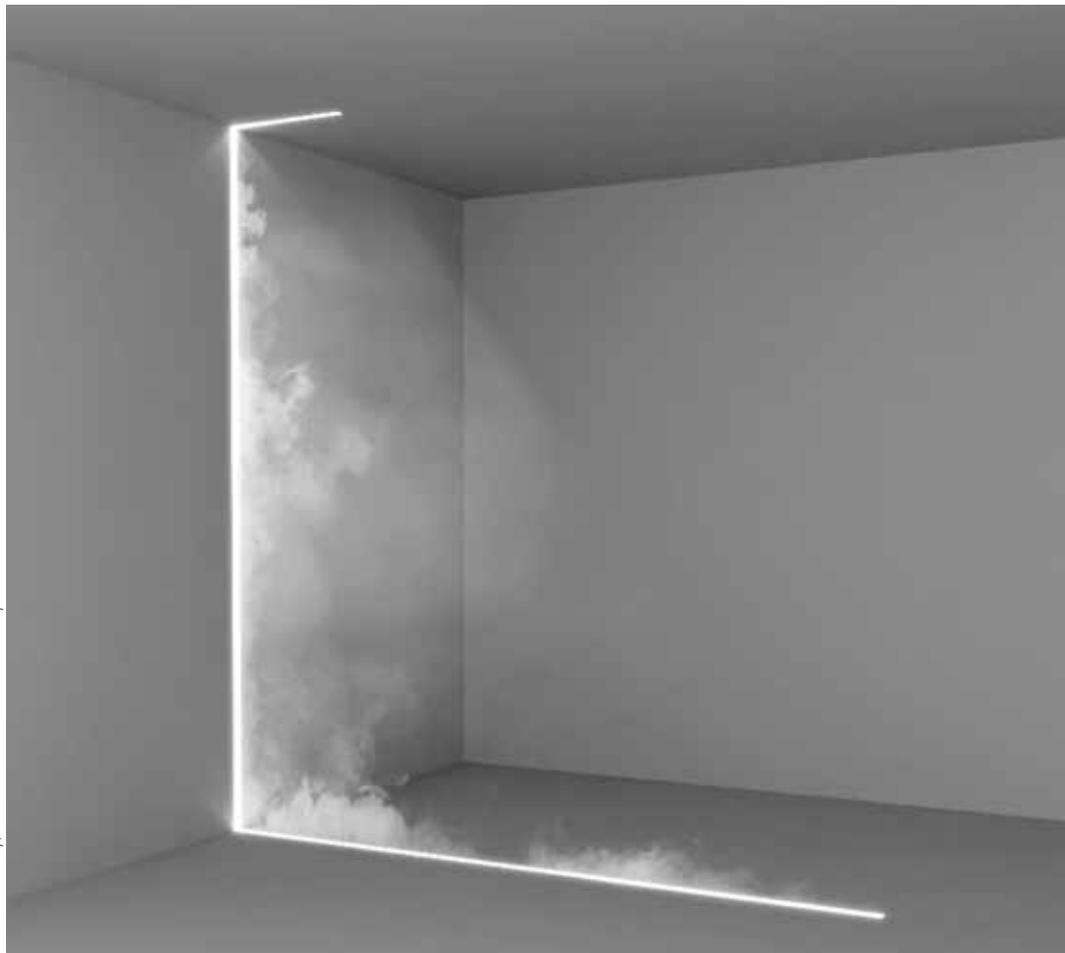


Art and soul

With the highlight of the Belgian art year around the corner, we examine what's turned Brussels into such a hotspot for contemporary art



Pascal Handressy, Monolithe 05 © Irène Laub Gallery

In the Belgian art calendar, April is a special month. Each spring gallery owners, collectors and enthusiasts from around the world gather in Brussels for the country's art event of the year: contemporary art fair Art Brussels. Its 35th edition brings together 142 galleries from 28 countries, and the event attracts a growing number of satellite fairs and side shows; a fact that speaks for the quality of both Art Brussels and the city's artistic landscape in general. The ultimate stamp of approval was the arrival of New York's celebrated Independent fair last year, which chose Brussels for its first edition outside its native city.

How has Brussels developed into such a hotspot for contemporary art? It's a mix of many factors, and, according to gallery owner Harlan Levey, who moved here from the US more than 15 years ago, it has a lot to do with figures. "If you want to know about the change in the last decade, we can start with numbers," he says. "More people and organisations are moving to the city, more artists, more curators, more galleries, more non-profits, more, more and more. The cultural offer here is huge, diverse and without fear of complexity."

Indeed, Brussels today has all the ingredients for a dynamic, vibrant art scene, from a varied traditional offering of commercial galleries and institutions such as Wiels and Bozar to renowned art schools and a lively non-profit scene. But this hasn't always been the case. So what's fuelling this influx of art professionals?

One of the main reasons is a very practical one. French-born Sébastien Ricou, who ran his own gallery in Brussels for years and recently founded

art space Attic, says: "The main motivation to choose Brussels over Paris was, and still is, the lower rents. Plus, it's very well-connected and easy to travel from." Damien Bertelle-Rogier, a Parisian who opened his gallery, Super Dakota, in Brussels in 2012, feels the same. "Having a closet-sized space in Paris wasn't appealing to me. I wanted a proper space. I had very little money but big ambitions, and Brussels felt like a good place to be."

The lower rents and availability of space are an advantage not just for gallerists but also for the artists themselves. Lény Bernay from Bordeaux arrived in Brussels in the summer of 2015. "I'd been looking for a studio in Paris or Bordeaux for a year, in vain. I make electronic music, performance, and experiment a lot with sculptures, so

"The art scene here is very easy to access, for artists and collectors and anyone else"

Rodolphe Janssen



I really need a big place with heating where I can make noise. First I was in a former postal sorting centre, now I'm in a huge studio that I share with other French artists. Lots of spaces are just temporary, but it's always easy to find a new one."

This large offer of cheap, vacant spaces has a direct impact on the scene's diversity and energy, as it leaves room for taking risks and experimenting. "Brussels has a much younger, more dynamic crowd than Paris or London," says Ricou. "There are lots of off-spaces thanks to the lower rents, which gives less established artists the opportunity to show their work." The strong scene of non-traditional, alternative spaces not focused on selling is something that's vital for young artists to launch their careers and step out in the art world. "There are so many ways to enter the art scene here in Brussels,"

Bernay confirms, adding: "What I love is that there's a certain goodwill between the artists here, not the animosity and pressure I'm used to from Paris."

This certain Belgian *je ne sais quoi* has been attracting art lovers for decades, and it's what makes it so approachable. According to Rodolphe Janssen, a veteran of the Brussels art scene who opened his gallery at the beginning of the 90s, this friendliness factor matters. "The art scene here is very easy to access, for artists and collectors and anyone else," he says. "It's not snobbish at all, like it is in many other cities."

The lack of snobbism and fierce competition is accompanied by a great degree of connoisseurship, which makes the city even more appealing. While Belgium boasts the highest density of collectors in Europe, alongside Switzerland, it's known for not only quantity but quality. "Belgian collectors are not just rich people looking for a way to spend their money, as can be the case in London, for example," explains Janssen. "The collectors here are very knowledgeable."

This was also one of the driving forces behind Bertelle-Rogier's decision to open his gallery in Brussels. "The city doesn't have the cultural infrastructures of London or Paris, there's very little help from the government, no great art media, and no contemporary art museum yet, but it features a lot of great programmes, at places like Jan Mot, Wiels, Xavier Hufkens, Clearing, Dépendance, Greta Meert and Gladstone. Brussels isn't a place for spectacle but it is a place for high quality art."

He's right: despite its many qualities, Brussels lags behind the major metropolises when it comes to institutionalised art. But that's not necessarily such a bad thing. On the contrary, according to Xavier Hufkens, who opened his first gallery in Brussels about 30 years ago. "When it comes to museums and grand collections like the Louvre, the situation is scarce in Brussels," he says. "So the citizens take it upon themselves to do things, which makes for a very dynamic and friendly environment."

This do-it-yourself mentality is striking. While Middlemarch sets up exhibitions at home in a private apartment, the Rectangle collective show art on a large billboard above their studio roof in Saint-Gilles, and art students organise their own exhibitions instead of waiting for a gallery to represent them. One of them is Lisa Lapierre, who launched her exhibition project Foreseen a couple of years ago. "Here, anyone can give it a try, and it's much easier to gather people and find followers than in other cities. The Brussels art scene encourages honesty and determination."

The future looks bright, too. If all goes according to plan, Brussels will finally get its own modern art museum. Last autumn, Paris's Centre Pompidou and the Brussels-Capital Region signed a memorandum that envisages its opening in the city's former Citroën building in 2020. And though some are already damning the rising gentrification, Brussels remains a hotbed for artists of all shapes and forms. Levey: "It's so hard to be an artist, and rightfully so. That said, there aren't many cities where it's easier to harbour dreams of becoming one than it is in Brussels." • Sarah Schug

ART FAIR TIPS FOR NEWBIES

The first steps of buying contemporary art can be daunting for the inexperienced collector. Liv Vaisberg – art adviser, co-founder of Poppositions, founder of design fair Collectible, former director of Independent and founder of Complex, which offers tailor-made tours through Brussels' art scene – shares her tips on how to navigate the art fair jungle.

DO ask galleries in advance to be invited to the VIP preview, or go on the Friday, when it's quiet. Quickly scan the fair before going more in-depth in booths that have caught your eye

DON'T be scared to ask gallerists about the works or prices. You won't understand a lot of contemporary art by just looking at it – you need background

DO buy artists on whom you have a crush, but go home first to learn more about them

DON'T buy with your ears, just because you've heard a certain artist is hot

DO use art advisers or join art groups. Some specialise in accompanying budding collectors to help them choose

DON'T hesitate to focus on young galleries. If they've been selected, it's a token of quality

artbrussels.com



Walid Siti, The Black Tower, courtesy the artist & Zilberman Gallery, Istanbul/Berlin