

Art city

While Brussels has evolved into a prime art destination all year round, April will always hold a special place in the local art calendar

★ By Sarah Schug

An epicentre of contemporary art”, the Washington Post recently gushed about Brussels, while the New York Times has previously made the case for it being “the new Berlin”. It’s fair to say the city’s rapidly growing art scene has been seriously hyped in the past few years.

That excitement is probably most evident during late April, when its streets buzz with collectors, curators and movers and shakers of all kinds who flock to Belgium not only for long-standing contemporary fair Art Brussels, but also for the numerous side events it inspires. Galleries put on their most ambitious shows, new art spaces time their launch with the fair, and artists open their studios to the public. With the homegrown art scene showing its best side, it’s a great moment to discover it all in one go.

“The fair and the local scene mutually influence each other,” says Anne

Vierstraete, who has been at the helm of Art Brussels since 2013. “We want to translate the daringness and diversity of the scene into the fair. Brussels has a very specific DNA, which is linked to the kind of collectors you find here. There’s a tradition of curiosity for new talent. Plus, Brussels is accessible, dynamic and informal, which makes for a very particular vibe.” Art Brussels, founded in 1968, has not only proved itself as one of the most important fairs in Europe, it is now primarily known as an excellent place for talent-spotting.

The upcoming 38th edition, taking place from 23 to 26 April in the 19th-century Tour & Taxis building, a former freight station, will feature for the second year running the Invited section, which pays tribute to the city’s multi-faceted scene by giving carte blanche to projects eschewing the classic gallery system. “We’ve been observing in Brussels, as well as in other cities, new models of approaching the art market and selling art, like nomadic collectives

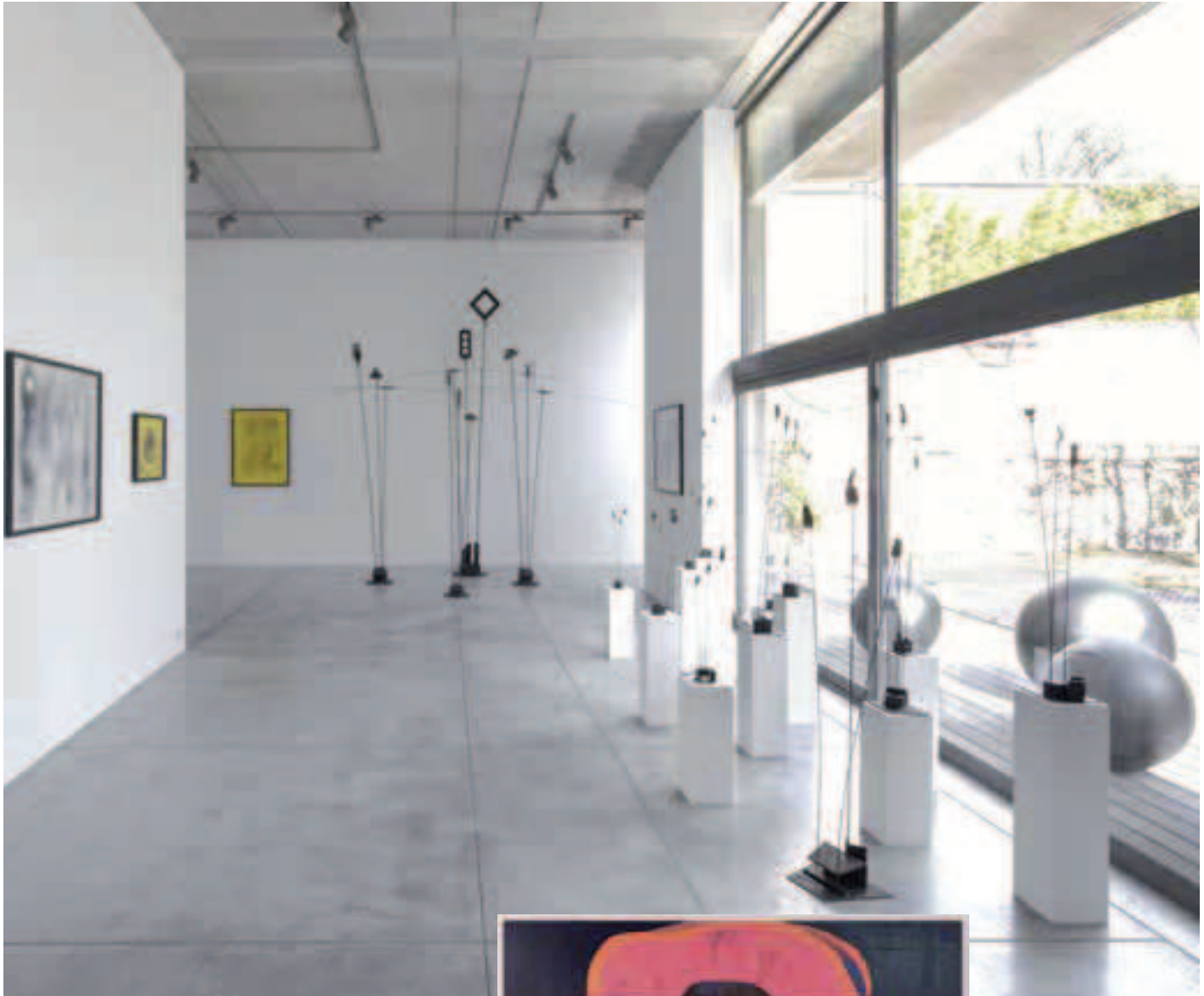
or pop-up projects. We felt we needed to reflect this trend in the fair,” Vierstraete explains.

A lot has changed since seasoned art dealer Albert Baronian, a regular at Art Brussels, first opened up his gallery in 1973. “When I would show at Art Basel in the 70s and 80s, and I asked my Swiss collectors why they never came to my gallery in Brussels, I’d always get the same answer: ‘But what is there to see? There is nothing besides you!’”

Today, this couldn’t be further from the truth. The number of galleries, non-profits and project spaces in the city has risen exponentially, and the opening of Wiels in 2007, a contemporary



Albert Baronian Gallery



Alex Foxtan,
Ultramarine solo show
©Galerie Derouillon
(Art Brussels 2020)

art centre in a former brewery, turned out to be a game-changer, rapidly establishing itself as one of the leading institutions for contemporary art in Europe while attracting foreign artists with its residency programme. “Wiels is a great benchmark for how the whole ecosphere here has changed,” says US-born Harlan Levey, who started a project space in Brussels in 2012 that has since turned into a serious gallery business.

“When I started out, there were about fifteen serious contemporary art galleries in all of Belgium,” Baronian remembers. NECA, an initiative serving as an information resource bundling the best contemporary art exhibitions throughout



Simon Fujiwara,
A Conquest, 2020
©Dvir



the city, currently has 50 galleries for Brussels alone. “Now, the French come here with the Thalys over the weekend to do gallery tours. Brussels’ programme is almost on the same level as Paris, and some galleries even choose Brussels over Paris or London as their place of residence,” Baronian says.

One of these galleries is Dvir, founded in 1982 in Tel Aviv. For its only other space outside its home country, it picked Brussels. In 2016, Dvir moved into the gallery hub 67 Rue de la Régence, sharing a roof with fellow dealers Sorry We’re Closed and Montoro12, among others. Brussels director Yotam Shalit-Intrator: “There’s a great energy here, and the geographic location in the middle of Europe is practical. The city’s state of mind fits the personality of the gallery. It’s not about spectacle but about content. People are serious about art. Curators and collectors visit lots of shows, regardless of the status of a place.”

For artists, this lack of a pecking order enables them to make useful connections that might not be possible in other cities. “There’s a very special atmosphere here,” says Juan Pablo Plazas, a young Colombian artist who moved to Brussels in 2011. Since then, he has found gallery representation in the Netherlands and his work has been featured in numerous exhibitions.

“The scene is so friendly and open, I never felt like an outsider. There is no hierarchy: I could easily speak to people I admired. Everyone is on the same level,” he adds. Plazas occupies one of many artist studios in the recently repurposed military barracks in Ixelles, and describes his workspace as “big and super cheap” – an alien concept in neighbouring capitals.

The apparent abundance of space paired with relatively low living costs

Brussels’ art scene has been extending its playground, spreading all around the city

offer a fruitful breeding ground for a vibrant non-profit scene, and it remains a major factor for attracting artists. When Dutch-born Wouter Huis was looking for a studio after his postgrad studies, he discovered an abandoned monastery in the middle of the city. Under the name Greylight Projects, which he founded in 2013, it now provides workspaces for about 20 artists. But the continuous boom, as in every city, comes hand in hand with ongoing gentrification. “There’s no safety. The moment the owner finds an investor, we will have to leave,” he says.

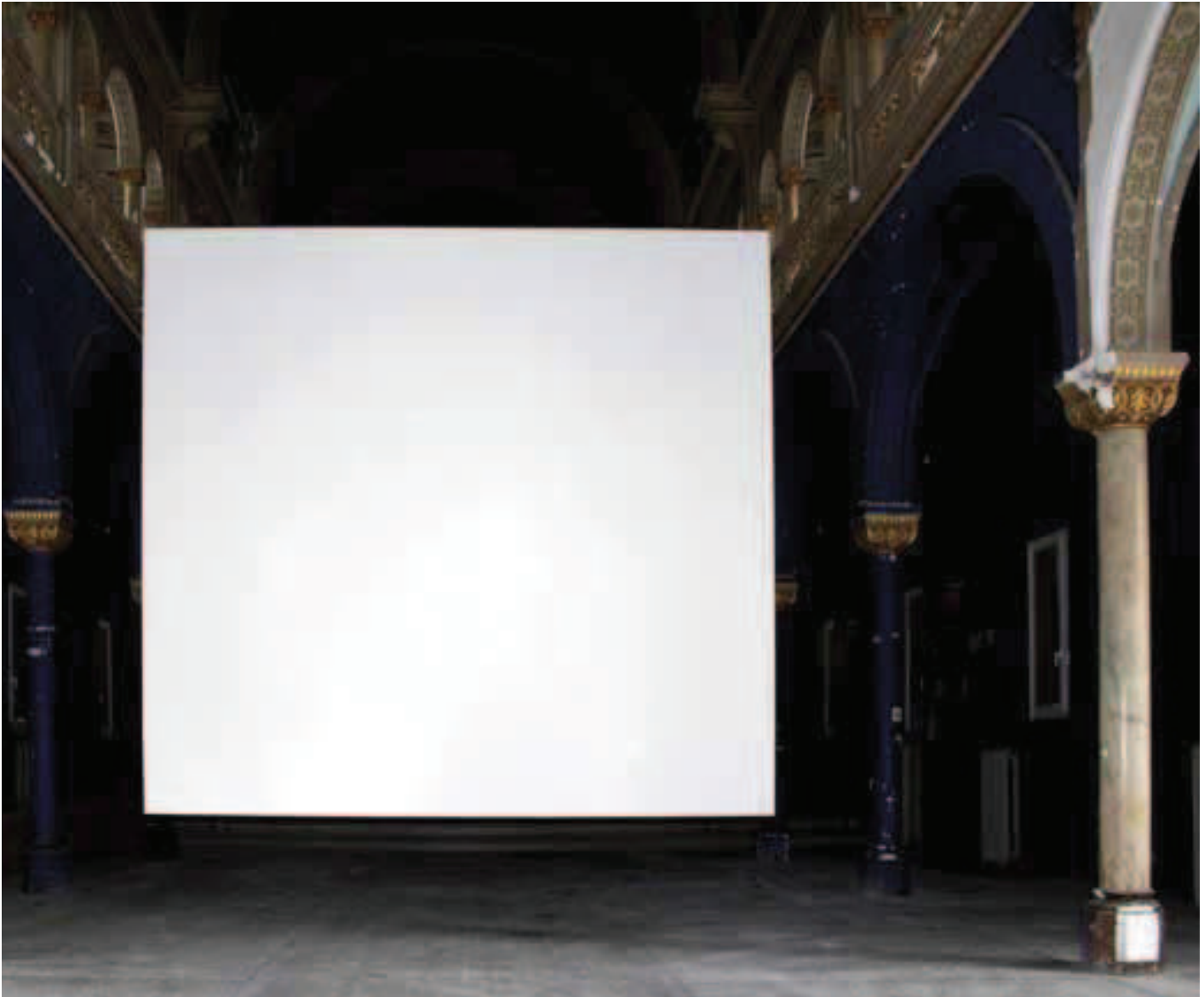
As a consequence, Brussels’ art scene has been extending its playground,

spreading all around the city. The canal area and the adjacent neighbourhood of Molenbeek in particular have become increasingly popular with the artist crowd. It’s also where the city’s museum for contemporary art, Kanal Centre Pompidou, will open in the former Citroën Garage sometime in 2022 or 2023.

“It’s like with Chelsea in the 70s or Bushwick recently – no one wanted to go there but artists move to where it’s cheap,” explains Levey, comparing it to New York. This year he will leave his current space in a central townhouse for a giant warehouse in Molenbeek, opening up immense new opportunities. “I don’t believe there is anywhere else in the

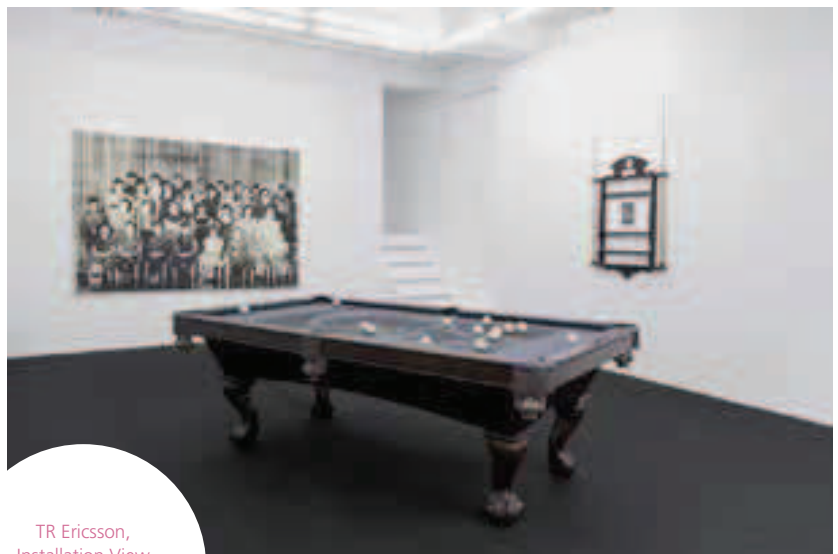


Wouter Huis,
Untitled (square), 2016,
The Chapel at Greylight
Projects Brussels



world where it would have been possible to start a gallery with no capital, no history, no contacts with wealthy people and no experience of running your own business," he adds. "Brussels is the only place where you can open a gallery with almost no rent, no heating and no toilet and attract an educated, interesting audience that is willing to participate in the conversation." It sounds a lot like a love letter.

artbrussels.com



TR Ericsson,
Installation View
©Harlan Levey Projects
2018