

At Art Basel, Art Flourishes Outside and In

By Ted Loos

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What's more charming than a European town square in summer? The concept calls to mind fountains, gardens and cafe dining.

The Messeplatz in Basel, Switzerland, is a bit more utilitarian than that. It's a small paved area sometimes used as a fairground, but it serves one of the core purposes of a town square: providing a gathering place, especially during the city's most famous event, Art Basel.

The 49th edition of what is perhaps the world's most prestigious art fair runs from Thursday to Sunday in the Messe Basel exhibition hall. Art Basel, which also produces fairs in Miami Beach and Hong Kong, will bring together about 290 galleries from 35 countries.

The fair traditionally uses Messeplatz for a public project, and now it has commissioned the New York-based public art nonprofit Creative Time to do an installation there.

"Basilea," on view through the end of the fair, is a collaboration of the artists Lara Almarcegui and Isabel Lewis and the Santiago Cirugeda-led architecture studio Recetas Urbanas. It is Creative Time's first international commission.

The artists did some critical thinking about the venue.

"What does Messeplatz do as an urban space?" asked Ms. Lewis, who is based in Berlin. "It's supposedly a public space, but only because it's not enclosed. It doesn't address humans, it doesn't ask you to linger or encounter others."

So they built a temporary two-story structure that contains a space for talks, and a rest area for fairgoers and anyone else who needs a break.

"As citizens, we have a role in activating public space," said Elvira Dyangani Ose, the Creative Time senior curator who worked on the project.

Ms. Lewis said that “Basilea,” which opened in late May, would have programming every day of the fair, from tai chi sessions to a “slow walk” across the square, and that some events would be set to music. “Music can hold a space, like architecture does,” said Ms. Lewis, who is also a composer.

She added that “Basilea” had a goal at its core: “Not only do we want to survive urban life, we want to flourish.”



The dealer Eva Presenhuber said she showed works of “the most substance and value” at Art Basel. Here, “Crowds,” a lightbox by Doug Aitken.

Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Eva Presenhuber Zurich, New York

Inside the exhibition hall, of course, flourishing has a distinctly commercial cast, as dealers from around the world serve up a groaning board of thousands of artworks.

There are no major changes at the fair for this edition, and that blue-chip consistency over almost five decades is exactly what dealers and collectors prize.

The dealer Eva Presenhuber, who has galleries in Zurich and New York, said she saved the works of “the most substance and value” for Art Basel, compared to her appearances at other fairs.

“The client in Basel is coming to buy art, not just look at it,” Ms. Presenhuber said. “And all the galleries act accordingly.”

This round, she will show a bronze sculpture by Ugo Rondinone and a lightbox by Doug Aitken, among other works, in her presentation in the main sector, Galleries. (She is also co-producing a show of Douglas Gordon, with Gagosian Gallery, in the Unlimited sector.)

There are 10 dealers that are “graduating,” in the fair’s terminology, from other sectors into Galleries, including Alexander Gray Associates, Mendes Wood DM and 47 Canal.

“This is the kind of rejuvenation that always brings a new energy to the show,” said Marc Spiegler, Art Basel’s global director.

Alexander Gray, based in New York and formerly in the Feature sector, will focus on African-American artists, including Jack Whitten and Melvin Edwards. The booth includes Mr. Whitten’s “Yellow, Black and Red” (1979-80), made of acrylic and string on canvas.

Bergamin & Gomide of São Paulo, Brazil, which had also previously exhibited in the Feature sector, is new to Galleries, too. “We are super proud and happy to be there,” said Thiago Gomide, one of the directors. The gallery’s focus is Brazilian art from the 1950s to the 1980s, with an emphasis on the 1960s. “It was a period when great artists flourished in Brazil,” Mr. Gomide said. “An amazing time for the country.”

The artists in the Bergamin & Gomide booth include Lygia Clark, Sergio Camargo and Mira Schendel. Mr. Camargo (1930-90), whom Mr. Gomide described as “perhaps the most influential Latin-American artist at that time,” is represented by a blocky, untitled work in Carrara marble.

“It’ll feel like you’re walking into a little Brazilian universe of the ’60s,” Mr. Gomide added. “You’ll feel the energy.”

The veteran dealer Emmanuel Perrotin will show several works by the artist Bernard Frize, including the painting “Okaki” (2018).

All rights reserved Bernard Frize/ADAGP, Paris 2018. Courtesy of the artist & Perrotin

The relentless schedule of art fairs around the world has created its own ecosystem, with large galleries treating them as an independent branch of their business.

“We do 21 fairs around the world,” said the veteran dealer Emmanuel Perrotin. “It’s crazy.”

Then again, he is used to spreading himself around, since he also has exhibition spaces in Paris; New York; Tokyo; Seoul, South Korea; Hong Kong; and Shanghai.

Mr. Perrotin said he had dedicated teams for Asian art fairs, European fairs and American fairs. The goal of all this exposure, he said, was for people everywhere to “see the works of my artists in person, and not just on Instagram.”

His usual booth at Art Basel is a “triplex,” he said, a quirky space with three levels that allows him to vary his presentation. “It was a space nobody wanted, but we are super happy with it,” he added.

One level will feature works by the New York artist Daniel Arsham, and another is a co-produced show, with Simon Lee Gallery, of the artist Bernard Frize. Mr. Frize, who is based in Berlin and Paris, has an exhibition next year in Paris at the Centre Pompidou. Mr. Perrotin will show several of Mr. Frize’s works, including the painting “Okaki” (2018).

Outside the exhibition hall, the city of Basel has more art offerings on view than just “Basilea.”

“One of our great strengths of Basel is the parallel shows in museums,” Mr. Spiegler said. “And this year it’s an especially strong array.”

The Kunstmuseum Basel has two shows of prominent African-American artists on view during the fair. “The Music of Color” features of the work of the 84-year-old Washington, D.C., artist Sam Gilliam.

The other exhibition, “Theaster Gates: Black Madonna,” will display works of the Chicago-based Mr. Gates, some made especially for the space.

On view at the Schaulager is the retrospective of the American artist Bruce Nauman that comes to the Museum of Modern Art in the fall. “You could spend several hours there, and it would be totally worth it,” Mr. Spiegler said.

The tone of Mr. Nauman’s pointed and provocative works, like the 1985 neon “Sex and Death by Murder and Suicide,” on view at the Schaulager, seems to dovetail with a spate of what Mr. Spiegler called “extremely political” works at the fair.

One example in the Unlimited sector is the 2010 installation by the Bulgarian artist Nedko Solakov, “I Miss Socialism, Maybe ...” It features video, painting, graffiti and nine sofa-shaped sculptures. Rirkrit Tiravanija’s “untitled 2015 (bangkok boogie woogie, no. 1)” also in Unlimited, addresses political protests in Bangkok.

“In the era of WikiLeaks, the refugee crisis and Brexit,” Mr. Spiegler said, “artists are not only empowered to talk politics, they feel compelled to do so.”

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