



Once upon a time, artists in search of a canvas for their talents routinely flocked to New York, Miami or Berlin. But these days, Brussels – which hosts the Art Brussels fair this month – is quietly stealing the limelight. **Clodagh Kinsella** reveals the charms of Europe's eccentric capital of art

As the home of the European Parliament, Belgian chocolate and Mannekin Pis, Brussels doesn't immediately seem like a natural hub for contemporary art. But, undaunted by the clichés, artists and galleries are descending on the city – keen to join one of the most dynamic scenes in Europe.

In part, Brussels' rise is due to the central location that made it the de facto seat of the European Union, with easy links to London, Paris and Berlin. Cheap rents and an interested public are further boons, while Belgium's rich tradition of collectors wards off the stifling sense of competition that dominates in Berlin. There is a feeling that while the scene there is saturated, young galleries in Brussels can still make an impact.

"It might not be as alternative as Berlin, but Brussels offers calm and a real visibility for art," says Barthélémy Schöller, of hip Brooklyn Gallery C-L-E-A-R-I-N-G, which opened in an Avenue Louise townhouse in 2011. Generally the posh semi-residential area, known as 'uptown', is

home to established international names like French powerhouses Nathalie Obadia and Almine Rech, and Belgian pioneer Rodolphe Janssen, but even edgy young galleries like C-L-E-A-R-I-N-G are joining the act.

The city's other main pocket of activity is 'downtown', around Boulevard Barthélémy and fashion hub Rue Antoine Dansaert, which tends to attract experimental galleries like Catherine Bastide and dépendance. There's a supportive vibe among such galleries, with collective openings during events like September's Brussels ArtDays.

"Brussels always was a hidden treasure without becoming too hip," says Michael Callies of dépendance, which opened in 2003. "Its other attractions? Definitely WIELS. Its residency programme brings new artists to Brussels."

A non-profit organisation, WIELS occupies the 1930s Wielemans-Ceuppens Brewery, and has hosted temporary shows by artists like Belgian star Francis Alÿs. Up on the Mont des Arts, the Palais des Beaux-Arts (Bozar), meanwhile, has become the city's most dynamic museum, with broad Pompidou Centre-style programming.



Top: *Chevron*, by Sascha Braunig; Right: *Le Perroquet Bleu* by Johan Creten, from the Almine Rech gallery

ART

Although it has no centralised museum district, Brussels' small size makes such attractions easily navigable – but it helps to know where to look. “Many things are hidden and happen with a whisper, which is Brussels' special charm,” says Katerina Gregos, the art director of the city's flagship fair Art Brussels (18-21 April).

In fact, for a new wave of artists and curators, Brussels' great asset is that it provides opportunities to sidestep the classic ‘White Cube’ set-up. Last November, *We do not remember the Berlin wall*, a group show of 12 young artists, repurposed an old hardware factory called the Quincaillerie Vander Eycken. “Recently there have been more and more hidden shows,” says the event's co-curator Barthélémy Schöller, born in 1989. “It's because of a new energy in contemporary art, which is being driven by a young generation.”

Intriguingly, Brussels' contemporary art boom comes despite the lack of any comprehensive government arts policy – symbolised by the controversial fate of the city's modern art collection.

“The Belgian Museum of Modern Art is practically only a name,” Katerina Gregos explains. “It is part of the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, but its collection is hardly ever on show.” Mostly comprising Belgian pre-war works and a rather thin array of post-war art, the collection sits in the building's basement, ousted by a fin-de-siècle museum opening upstairs in May.

The museum's director, Michel Draguët, is pushing for a flagship museum of contemporary art, but it's a long-term plan, dependent on navigating pluri-lingual issues and crumbling budgets.

In the meantime, the city remains pleasingly rough around the edges, engendering spontaneous encounters and collective ventures. “Brussels is, thankfully, uninfected by city marketing and branding,” says Gregos. “This makes it one of Europe's most individualistic capitals.”

In 2011, the American magazine *ARTnews* ranked six Belgians among the world's most active collectors. Historically, the state hasn't managed to take advantage of its art lovers. The well-known Herman

“ARTNEWS RANKED SIX BELGIANS AMONG THE WORLD'S MOST ACTIVE ART COLLECTORS”



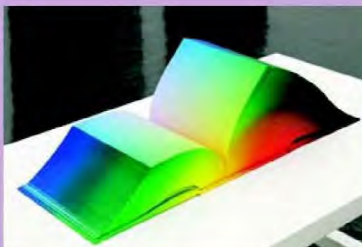
Top: Art Brussels runs from 18-21 April 2013; Above: *Paysage de Banlieue* by Olivier Kosta-Théfaïne

Daled collection of 1960s and 1970s conceptual art, for instance, was sold to New York's Museum of Modern Art.

“Belgians are very discreet and prefer to share their collections with people they know or loan them to international museum groups,” explains Walter Vanhaerents. Like the semi-public Marc Vanmoerkerke Collection at Ostende, the Brussels-based Vanhaerents Art Collection showcases a change of attitude.

A real-estate developer and Warhol obsessive, Vanhaerents opened his space to the public in 2007, after discovering a three-story warehouse in an Arab neighbourhood. So far, two rock'n'roll-themed group shows have drawn from his private collection of 20th-century pop icons, with current show *Sympathy for* ➤

CONTEMPORARY ART HOTSPOTS

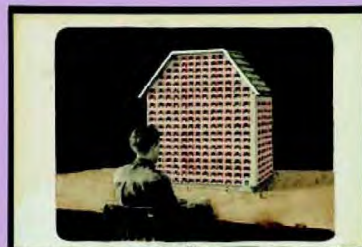


■ WIELS, Avenue Van Volxemlaan 354, 1190 Brussels, +32 (0)2 340 00 53, wiels.org

Since it opened in 2007, the former brewery has made waves with well-curated temporary shows. The latest is by rising star Tauba Auerbach, whose show *Tetrachromat* (until 2 June) investigates the idea of a fourth colour spectrum.

■ The Vanmoerkerke Collection, Oud Vliegenveld 10, 8400 Ostend, +32 473 99 77 45, artcollection.be

This hangar-like space in Ostend showcases one of the world's best collections of European and American post-conceptual art, from Ed Ruscha to Gerhard Richter. Every six months the semi-private venture hosts shows which open to the public.



■ S.M.A.K, Citadelpark, 9000 Ghent, +32 (0)9 240 76 01, smak.be

Ghent's contemporary art museum is renowned for its heavyweight permanent collection and provocative exhibitions. *ENSEMBLEMATIC* (until 2 June) presents works by artists including Belgian icons Marcel Broodthaers and Luc Tuymans.



the Devil featuring morbid works by Steve McQueen and Matthew Day Jackson. At present it's open on Saturdays but by appointment only.

Unusually, Art Brussels profits from a committee of collectors that helps promote its work abroad. Although it remains, as gallerist Rodolphe Janssen puts it, "the premier fair of the second league" – i.e. behind Art Basel and Frieze, but ahead of Cologne – Gregos prefers to focus on this asset. "When it comes to collectors, Belgium ranks at the top of the premier league. They have a fine eye for new developments, buy early, and are very dedicated."

The shape of the fair has even morphed to accommodate a taste for new art alongside established names. The First Call section at the entrance is reserved for galleries like debut participant Croy Nielsen. Gregos, who took over the running

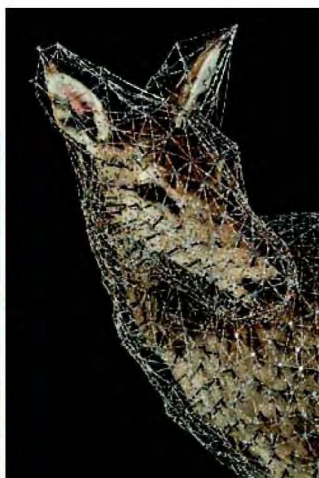
“ARTISTS AND GALLERIES ARE DESCENDING ON BRUSSELS TO JOIN ONE OF THE MOST DYNAMIC SCENES IN EUROPE”

Clockwise from left: *Hope always sees beautiful things* by Fiona Rae; *Constellation de la Biche II, 2012 (detail of)* by Julien Salaud; *3 Libras* by Torben Giehler

of the fair at the end of last year after the premature death of long-time director Karen Renders, has more plans like this up her sleeve for the 31st edition.

Young Belgian artist Tom Mares has devised an 'art city' concept whereby visitors arrive at an airport-style check-in, while coloured markers lead to distinct areas like The Stage – for talks and encounters with artists. Six of Brussels' influential artist and curator-run spaces – including Komplot – will be presenting projects to offset the fair's commercial remit, while 60 international curators have been invited to meet with Brussels-based artists.

Gregos cites them as the driving force of Brussels' new buzz. "Brussels is not 'the new Berlin' as I have heard many people say," she states. "Things are definitely happening, but slowly and without a lot of fanfare. The greatest asset we have is the artists themselves." Brussels is no stranger to such diplomacy, but these days it's helping to forge the EU's new seat of art. artbrussels.be



FR L'ART POUR L'ART

A l'heure de l'ouverture imminente d'Art Brussels, la ville est en train de voler la vedette au reste du monde dans le domaine de l'art, révèle Clodagh Kinsella

Bruxelles n'est pas considérée comme « la » métropole de l'art contemporain, mais faisant fi des clichés, artistes et galeries descendent sur la ville pour y rejoindre une des scènes les plus dynamiques d'Europe.

L'ascension de Bruxelles est due en partie à sa position centrale, avec un accès direct à Londres, Paris et Berlin. Ses autres atouts sont ses loyers bon marché et un public de connaisseurs, ainsi que sa grande tradition de collectionneurs. Une dimension qui permet de dépasser le sens aigu de la compétition qui domine à Berlin.

C'est généralement dans le quartier huppé semi-résidentiel (*uptown*), que l'on trouve les galeries internationales de haut vol, avec notamment les deux maisons françaises Nathalie Obadia et Almine Rech, ou le pionnier belge Rodolphe Janssen. S'y implantent également de jeunes galeries pointues.

Le *downtown* est l'autre poche d'activités, principalement autour du Boulevard Barthélemy et de la trendy rue Antoine Dansaert, qui attire des galeries expérimentales comme Catherine Bastide et dépendance.

« Bruxelles a toujours été un joyau caché sans devenir trop branchée, » dit Michael Callies de dépendance. « Les points d'intérêts ? Incontestablement WIELS. Son programme de résidences fait venir de nouveaux artistes dans la capitale. »

L'asbl WIELS, dans l'ancienne brasserie Wielemans-Ceuppens (1930), a organisé des expositions temporaires d'artistes comme la star belge Francis Alys. En remontant en direction du Mont des Arts, le Palais des Beaux-Arts (Bozar), est devenu l'un des musées les plus actifs de la ville.

Pour une nouvelle génération d'artistes et de curateurs, le grand avantage de Bruxelles est d'offrir d'autres opportunités que le classique espace *White Cube*. En novembre dernier, *We do not remember the Berlin wall*, une exposition de groupe a pris ses quartiers dans l'ancienne Quincaille Vander Eycken.

« Heureusement, Bruxelles n'est pas contaminée par le *city marketing*, » explique Katerina Gregos, directrice d'Art Brussels. « Cela en fait l'une des capitales les plus individualistes d'Europe. » artbrussels.be

NL ALLES VOOR DE KUNST

Naarmate Art Brussels dichterbij komt, ontkedt Clodagh Kinsella hoe de stad steeds meer in de spotlight staat van de kunstwereld

Brussel lijkt misschien niet meteen een natuurlijke thuishaven voor hedendaagse kunst. Ondanks dit cliché, vinden steeds meer kunstenaars en galerieën hun weg naar deze stad om deel uit te maken van een van Europa's meest dynamische kunstscènes.

Brussel heeft haar opkomst deels te danken aan haar centrale ligging en haar gemakkelijke verbinding met Londen, Parijs en Berlijn. Daarnaast is de stad gezegend met goedkope huurprijzen en een geïnteresseerd publiek, terwijl de Belgische rijke verzamelaarstraditie komaf maakt met het competitiegevoel dat zegeviert in Berlijn.

De chique, semiresidentieële Brusselse buitenwijken huizen naast internationale namen zoals Nathalie Obadia, Almine Rech en de Belgische pionier Rodolphe Janssen, eveneens jonge, dynamische galerieën.

De andere kunstbuurt van de stad bevindt zich rond de Barthélemylaan en de Antoine Dansaertstraat, die vrij experimentele galerieën aantrekt zoals Catherine Bastide en dépendance.

"Brussels is altijd al een verborgen schat geweest zonder al te hip te worden", aldus Michael Callies van dépendance. "Haar andere sterke punten? Absoluut WIELS, met een programma dat nieuw artiesten naar Brussel brengt."

WIELS is een vzw die huist in de Wielemans-Ceuppens Brouwerij uit de jaren '30. Het verwelkomt reeds tijdelijke tentoonstellingen van kunstenaars zoals de Belgische ster Francis Alys. Bovenaan de Kunstberg groeide het Paleis voor Schone Kunsten (Bozar) uit tot het meest dynamische museum van de stad.

Tal van nieuwe kunstenaars en curatoren vinden het feit dat je in Brussel af kunt stappen van de traditionele paden, dé grote troef van de stad. Zo gaf afgelopen november *We do not remember the Berlin wall*, een groep van 12 jonge artiesten, de oude ijzerhandel Vander Eycken, fabriek een nieuwe functie.

"Brussel wordt gelukkig niet geplaagd door citymarketing en branding", aldus Katerina Gregos, directrice van Art Brussels. artbrussels.be