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Surprises and Innovations Abound at Art Basel

By LOUIS LUCERO II JUNE 15, 2017



A cast-iron tree by Ai Weiwei has been installed for the Art Basel fair in Switzerland. Credit Courtesy of Art Basel

Marc Spiegler, the global director of Art Basel, said Hong Kong has its galleries, while Miami is known for its private collections and Basel for its museums.

For all the obvious differences among these cities, when the Art Basel fair visits them each year, it anchors its shows in the same way, with a large showcase of presentations by international galleries. (The Basel show opens to the public on June 15.)

“There’s a relatively standard way of handling booths,” Mr. Spiegler said. Level walls, good lighting and wide corridors are prerequisites.

Indeed, the particular character of each city’s show begins to reveal itself only outside its Galleries sector, as these centerpiece exhibitions are known.

“Where they get really distinct from each other is once you leave the fair halls,” Mr. Spiegler said.

Even for an exposition as established as this one is (in 1970, the inaugural Art Basel was one of the first shows of its kind to be mounted), surprises and innovations abound this year.

Keys to the City

Artworks make their most decisive break with halls and walls in the Parcours sector, the slice of the Basel show dedicated to exhibitions of site-specific work in the public sphere. The city's neighborhoods are temporarily overtaken by so-called interventions at plazas, classrooms, riverbanks, water fountains and more.



Amanda Ross-Ho's installation consists of enlarged keys scattered throughout the city of Basel. Credit Courtesy of Art Basel

Samuel Leuenberger, the curator of Parcours and a native of Basel, likes to help the artists contributing to the sector get familiar with the host city, mainly by leading them on site visits.

“So many times we have an archive, we have a list of locations that sound great over a PDF or over the internet,” Mr. Leuenberger said. But artists frequently deviate from whatever plans they may have had for their pieces after arriving in Basel and walking through the city with him.

“Often the mind changes once we're here,” he said, adding, “I've learned more and more that I shouldn't have too much of a fixed idea.”

Now in his second year as the Parcours curator, Mr. Leuenberger has seen how the city of Basel's inclination to accommodate the fair can result in an extreme diversity of sites hosting installations. The artists themselves are often pleasantly surprised.

“Almost — almost — anything is possible in the area that we’ve selected for Parcours,” he said.

To wit: For the new work of the Los Angeles-based artist Amanda Ross-Ho, “Untitled Findings (ACCESS),” she has scattered enlarged replicas of keys across Basel.

“Once in a while, you’ll meet one of these keys: down in the river, in the sand; down the staircase, below the bridge; on the open street,” Mr. Leuenberger said.

A High-Art Scavenger Hunt

Ms. Ross-Ho’s exaggerated keys, modeled after functioning ones that open doors to real locations around the city, are almost certain to be come across by passers-by who had no expectation of a run-in with an Art Basel installation that day — chance encounters echoing the imagined accidents by which the keys were lost.



Claudia Comte’s participatory palindrome “NOW I WON.” Credit Courtesy of Art Basel

Another work created for this year’s Parcours, “Footnote to a Fountain” by the Belgian artist Sophie Nys, infiltrates Basel by way of its network of public water fountains, which have been chiefly ornamental since the advent of indoor plumbing in the city more than a century ago. For the piece, Ms. Nys has placed plastic canisters to collect water, briefly hold it, and return it to the cycle.

On the other hand, “Parasite Fountain,” by Katinka Bock, siphons water from the system without returning it. Inspired by the artist’s discovery of a dead catfish under a bridge in Basel — a creature associated in the popular imagination with insatiability and voracious growth — the work features a catfish cast in bronze, elevated on a pillar and bathed in a steady supply of municipal water.

Although the main Art Basel compound is at the Messe Basel exhibition site, there are treasures to be found on the opposite side of the Rhine. A cast-iron tree by Ai Weiwei, the Chinese artist and political dissident, has been installed for the fair on Münsterplatz, in the shadow of the historic Basel Minster cathedral.

Step Right Up

Mr. Leuenberger's familiarity with Basel is an asset to his work as Parcours curator, but his being Swiss also informed the mission of Salts, a nonprofit project space that he helped found in 2009 to promote young international and Swiss artists.

One of those young Swiss artists was Claudia Comte, who five years ago staged a small show in Salts' modest exhibition space — really, a backyard and a two-car garage. Today, Ms. Comte is the architect of the most prominent artwork at the 2017 Art Basel show: an enormous, participatory outdoor installation in the form of a carnival that the artist is calling “NOW I WON.”

To fairgoers, the installation, directly in front of the main exhibition pavilions, will be all but unavoidable. Ms. Comte's newly constructed funfair, which is not part of the Parcours sector, will encourage audience participation in activities including mini golf, arm-wrestling, bowling and darts.

But the games — all of which bear vaguely menacing names, like “Drop 'Em All” (bowling, but with original Comte sculptures as pins), “Dance or Die” (a dancing competition) and “Bend or Break” (arm-wrestling) — are only half the exhibition. Ms. Comte also used 23 six-meter tree trunks to render the name of the installation in lumber, a monumental creation set atop an artificial hill overlooking the carnival games.

Ms. Comte, who may be as fond of wordplay as a motif as she is of the chain saw as an artistic implement, described the phrase “NOW I WON” as “really one of the best palindromes that exists, I think, with great geometrical proportion.”



An installation by Sue Williamson consists of bottles in nets, each engraved with the name of a person ensnared by slavery. Credit Courtesy Goodman Gallery. Photograph by The Image Gate.

The opportunity to show her work in a way that's virtually impossible to miss, in the plaza that for one week in June is the undeniable center of the art world, is a thrill for the artist, who said she had always been drawn to public artworks on a grand scale.

"I'm trying to reach a large public, and this mixture of audience really fascinates me a lot," Ms. Comte said.

Hall of Grand Visions

Back indoors, beyond the false hill, the fair's Unlimited sector is showcasing 76 unconventional projects that could go toe to toe with Ms. Comte's triumphal log signage in terms of sheer ambition.

Unlimited was introduced at the 2000 fair as a platform for work that wouldn't be at home in a traditional fair booth, including performance and video art, large-scale sculpture and painting, and massive installations that defy easy categorization. It now rambles across 16,000 square meters of exhibition space in the largest of the Messe Basel pavilions, Hall 1.

Gianni Jetzer, curator of the Unlimited sector, selected this year's projects from some 180 applications, each of which was considered by a committee in January.

“It’s kind of a luxury nowadays to spend two days — two full days — discussing the relevance of art and the quality of specific artwork,” he said.

The creation of the exhibition space itself is similarly deliberate: For each of the last six years in which Mr. Jetzer has led Unlimited, he has begun with an empty hall and created roughly a mile of wall space to accommodate the artworks.

“It gives you a certain flexibility because I build the whole structure from scratch,” he said.

This year, the guiding conceit — inspired by the writings of Camillo Sitte, a long-dead Austrian urbanist — is a system of four squares that are variously dominated by a sprawling, inflated work from Otto Piene; a Sue Williamson installation consisting of glass bottles suspended from the ceiling with fishing nets, each one engraved with the name of a person ensnared in the slave trade, along with information about his or her country of origin, sale price and more; a 1967 Tony Smith sculpture; and a triangular array of steel tiles by Carl Andre.

Mr. Jetzer estimated it would take at least two and a half hours to see everything in Unlimited, 45 minutes if you proceeded briskly (he does not advise that). That is not bad for a group show of this magnitude. “It’s a group exhibition,” Mr. Jetzer said, “but basically it’s like 76 small solo exhibitions, put together.”

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