Neue Zürcher Zeitung

ART BASEL

DURING ART BASEL, THE MESSEPLATZ WILL LOOK SIMILAR TO THE INSTALLATION IN FRONT OF THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART (MOMA) IN NEW YORK: NAIRY BAGHRAMIAN, «S'ADOSSANT (PAULINE)», 2023, © NAIRY BAGHRAMIAN. (PHOTO: JONATHAN DORADO/COURTESY OF THE ARTIST)

DER NEUE BMW 7

BAYERISCHE MOTOREN WERKE

Extravagant or right on trend?

Philipp Meier,
Arts Editor NZZ

It's a summer of art. All eyes are on Europe, or more specifically **Basel** – though of course there's no overlooking **Venice**. Where the borders of Switzerland, France and Germany converge at the Rhine's great bend and in Italy's floating city, two of the defining fixtures on the international art calendar are underway: in the one the world's most influential art fair, and in the other the biennale against which all others are measured.

In truth, there isn't much that separates Art Basel from the Venice Biennale. Fashion offers a useful analogy: one is **haute couture**, the other **prêt-à-porter**. The installations and performances in Venice this year have dialed up the extravagance, putting them beyond the reach of collectors seeking works for everyday display. By contrast, the offerings in Basel are as attuned to the art world's zeitgeist as ever – and quick to attract buyers.

The names are often the same: established figures on the international stage sharing the spotlight with the latest crop of young talent. In Venice, they enjoy pride of place in the Giardini national pavilions; in Basel, they're available for purchase.

Consider the recently deceased doyenne of African art, **Seyni Awa Camara** (page 3). She caused a sensation at a recent edition of Art Basel Paris. Now, her terracotta sculptures of fertility goddesses are opening the main exhibition in Venice. In this Art Basel special, we take a closer look at the remarkable Senegalese artist who has managed to win the hearts of Western art lovers virtually overnight.

A few years ago, the Venice Biennale brought Iranian-Armenian sculptor **Nairy Baghramian** (page 1) to the attention of a broader public. Now, she has taken over Basel's Messeplatz. Her intervention unfolds across the 60-meter fountain in front of the exhibition hall, presenting a rhythmic arrangement of four large sculptural groups that evoke multi-part bodies poised somewhere between stillness and suspension.

This is by no means uncharted territory for the Berlin-based artist. She previously transformed the Metropolitan Museum's iconic Fifth Avenue facade in New York, filling the building's eight niches with abstract sculptures to create vibrant bouquets of form and color.

A similarly bold sense of scale characterizes the work of Italian artist **Marinella Senatore** (page 6). Last year, an oversize illuminated structure dominated the entrance area of Art Basel Unlimited. She is also exhibiting at this year's Venice Biennale. We profile both artists in this issue.

Are women setting the tone for the art on show in Basel and Venice this summer? Not entirely, but their influence is strong.

I hope you will find this issue enjoyable and inspiring.

Seyni Awa Camara (right) and one of her sons in her studio in southern Senegal, photographed in 2024. PHOTOS: JONATHAN FISCHER

Visions and dreams fired in clay

Seyni Awa Camara was a sorceress and her sculptures have achieved cult status: the outsider artist from southern Senegal and her mythical humanoid and animalistic ceramic sculptures are celebrated by leading Western museums and highly sought after on the art market – an encounter.

JONATHAN FISCHER
—

Seyni Awa Camara, who died in her native Senegal on January 25, 2026, seemed to have stepped off the pages of an artist's fairytale. It was a tale of forest spirits and genies, clairvoyance and dream-soaked rituals – one that can only be understood within the cultural context of the Diola people of southern Senegal. The mythology surrounding her proved irresistible to the Western art world. Her large terracotta figures, often depicting pregnant women or mothers with numerous children clinging to their bodies, found their way into the collections of major museums such as the Tate Modern, Fondation Louis Vuitton and the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao. They are now also on display as part of the main exhibition of the Venice Biennale.

The artist, who passed away in January this year, recently even managed to cross over into popular culture. This was despite the fact that she rarely left her hometown of Bignona. For example, US superstar Pharrell Williams curated an exhibition of her works at Galerie Perrotin in Paris in 2025, while British-Kenyan painter Michael Armitage exhibited Camara's sculptures alongside his paintings in a white cube gallery show in 2022.

Camara's exact date of birth is unknown; depending on the source, it is variously given as 1939 or 1945. What is certain, however, is that she continued working well into old age at her studio in Bignona, shaping clay into figures, family totems, multi-headed creatures and human-animal hybrids. Yet for all the demand for her work among Western collectors, she was shunned in her hometown throughout her life.

A visit to her studio in 2023 reveals just how much Camara remained an outsider. Even finding the place takes persistence: only after repeated inquiries will a neighbor lead the way to a modest house that sits on an unpaved road where pigs and chickens run freely. Situated opposite the compound of a respected local healer, the studio is accessed via a gate adorned with the silhouette of an Islamic saint. Crossing the threshold, there is a moment of suspense: is the sorceress of clay receiving visitors today? And who is this woman whose work has been praised by prominent artists such as Louise Bourgeois for its aesthetic coherence and spiritual depth?

Messengers from another world

The then 77-year-old is found seated in the entryway to a windowless room, her weathered face partially concealed beneath a headscarf in the half-light. Absorbed in her daily work, Camara seems as if in a trance. Perched on a stool before her is a head she is shaping, its features part human, part animal.

The elderly woman offers only a brief nod in greeting, leaving most of the conversation to two strapping young men who introduce themselves as Aliou and Mamadou, "the sons of Seyni Awa Camara". These two sculptors, their clothes bearing the traces of their labor, are busy working on waist-high figures, their hands making a soft slapping sound as they shape the damp clay. "She creates the faces and directs us for the rest," states Aliou, translating for his mother, who speaks Diola. Her figures, he says, are born of nocturnal visions and dreams.

"People are afraid of my work," Camara once revealed in a rare interview. "They see it as the work of messengers from another world." For many years, she sold her work solely to the tourists who passed through the market in Bignona. That was, until the French curator and gallery owner André Magnin chanced upon her work during a visit to the Casamance region of Senegal. Magnin described Camara's large clay figures as "a theater of characters and objects without a stage".

That was back in 1989. Seyni Awa Camara was then invited to participate in *Magiciens de la terre* in Paris, an exhibition that sought to break with the art world's practice at the time of excluding voices from the Global South. All of a sudden, galleries in Spain, France and the United States were clamoring to exhibit her sculptures, while authors and filmmakers made pilgrimages to Camara's studio, only to encounter an artist who seemed neither able nor willing to explain anything about the genesis of her work – a woman who had seemingly kneaded everything she had to say into the clay itself. As a result, she became a convenient canvas for all manner of projections about what made a 'true African genius'.

The myth of the forest spirit

According to legend, the young Seyni and her triplet brothers became lost in the forest near their native village while gathering firewood. When the children finally found their way home many months later, Seyni had with her a sizable lump of clay. As the story goes, a forest spirit or genie had taught her the art of pottery during her time away.

It proved to be her salvation. In Diola culture, twins and other multiple births are traditionally regarded as beings that exist between worlds. One of the children would often be abandoned in order to appease the spirits. On this occasion, however, it seems these supernatural forces allied themselves with the child, revealing a path that was uniquely hers to take. As a potter, Seyni had something that hadn't been seen before. Unlike the everyday clay vessels made by her mother, her figures belonged to no established tradition – neither in the Casamance nor in the West.

But what drew Camara to the recurring motif of maternal figures with children clinging to their bellies and backs? The artist herself rarely offered any clues beyond occasional references to "how elders and ancestors support a child". What is known is that Camara had four stillbirths. The sons working alongside her in the studio were adopted. She translated her suffering into universal themes: fertility, sexuality, and the intrusion of supernatural and animal elements into everyday human consciousness.

"She didn't choose this path," says one son, as his mother stoically shapes a human face from clay. "It is a calling." It is said that Camara always seeks out her genie – her guiding spirit – before beginning a new sculpture. Then she waits in one of the region's sacred forests for inspiration to strike.

Indeed, Camara's work points to a realm beyond the limits of ordinary perception, tapping into a cosmology in which the divine and the animal intersect. Over the course of her life, Seyni Awa Camara released thousands of these hybrid sculptures into the world – not to garner the interest of the art market, but as a spiritual practice. "They possess a power," she once explained. "A power that can heal."

IMPRESSUM

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Concept: Philipp Meier (Arts Editor NZZ). **Production:** Norman Bandi and Silvia Tschui. **Layout:** Sara Sparascio. **Sales:** Denise Morach. **Contact:** NZZone, c/o Neue Zürcher Zeitung AG, Falkenstrasse 11, CH-8021 Zurich, Switzerland, +41 44 258 16 98, sales@nzzone.ch.
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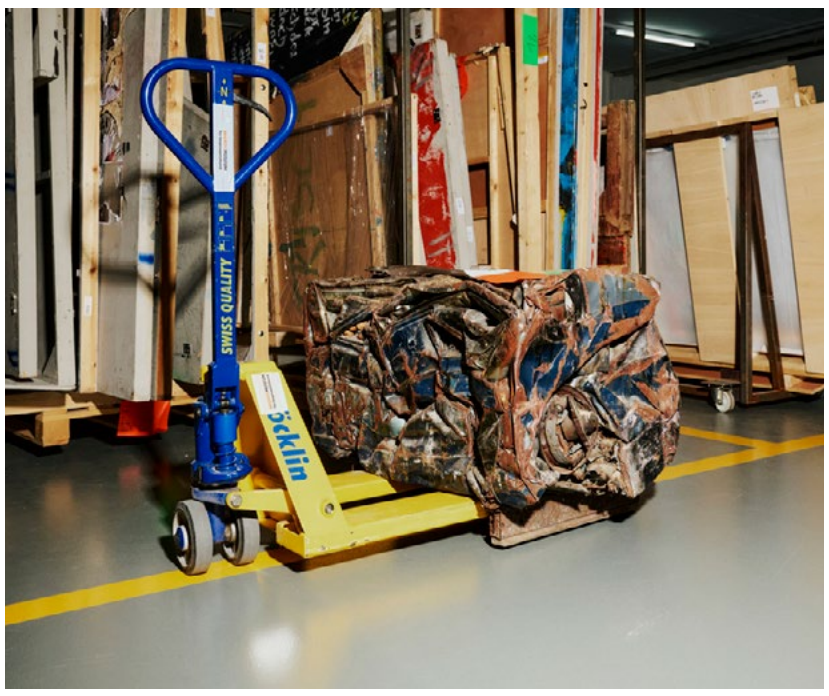
On the trail of art

Inside the Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst's hidden collection depot.
By Maria Becker (text) and Annick Ramp (photos)

Małgorzata Mirga-Tas, «September», 2022 (produced by Zacheta – National Gallery of Art, Warsaw), © Małgorzata Mirga-Tas.

PHOTOS: ANNICK RAMP, NZZ/COURTESY OF THE MIGROS MUSEUM FÜR GEGENWARTSKUNST COLLECTION

Christoph Schlingensief, «Kaprow City», 2007 (comprising canvases and a crushed car), © Christoph Schlingensief estate.



Christoph Schlingensief, «Kaprow City», 2007 (comprising canvases and a crushed car), © Christoph Schlingensief estate.

"It's like being at the top of Säntis," says Nadia Schneider Willen. The co-director and collection curator of the Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst is giving a tour of the museum's art depot. She is referring to the oxygen levels: the air in these rooms contains as much oxygen as would be found at an altitude of more than 2,000 meters. In the open air of Zurich, the concentration is around 21%; inside the depot, it is artificially lowered to between 16 and 17%. In other words, this is mountain air inside a hermetically sealed building.

Is the difference noticeable? For those who work here, most definitely. "My colleagues try not to spend more than a few hours at a time down here." The collection depot is a high-end storage facility. This is where the museum keeps its most valuable and above all most fragile works of art. Even if the thin air isn't immediately noticeable, working in these windowless rooms under perpetual artificial light is a challenge in itself.

It also constantly raises new questions for art conservators and handlers alike. Complex installations need to be stored safely, while perishable materials must be protected from deterioration – precisely why the oxygen concentration must be lowered. And if a fire were to break out, it would quickly find itself starved of oxygen.

The conservation of contemporary art is no longer about grappling with yellowing varnish or chipped marble toes. Today's restoration experts must contend with artworks fashioned from everything from plastics and foodstuffs to building supplies and everyday household items. In adopting the materials of everyday life, contemporary art has also inherited their tendency to decay. For this reason alone, contemporary art often resists long-term preservation. A collection depot like this exists to counter precisely those vulnerabilities. Its purpose is to ensure that the works can be exhibited again in the future and that their value is preserved.

The collection depot is a closely guarded facility, and neither its location nor its design is permitted to be disclosed to the outside world. From the train station, Nadia Schneider Willen leads me along a circuitous route to the building in question. The industrial estate in which it is located looks much like any other, while the building itself – with its gray walls and roller-shutter doors – is entirely unremarkable. Indeed, from the outside, no one would ever imagine this is actually a high-security storage facility for art.

Protection against earthquakes and fires is not enough: the safety measures go so far as to exclude water pipes from the entire building, as these, too, could become vulnerable in the event of a disaster or an act of sabotage. The building is completely self-sufficient in terms of electricity, with power generated via geothermal energy. And if water is needed? "It has to be brought in in bottles."

Why such extraordinary security measures? What treasures are being stored here? In addition to the collection of the Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst, a number of other institutions use the building for storage, though their identities remain confidential. At any rate, the depot meets the latest standards for the conservation of contemporary art. After all, it is the fragility of the works that calls for such measures to be taken. The fact that many pieces in the collection have appreciated significantly in value is naturally also a factor.

Conservation has its limits

Today, the collection consists of around 1,500 works. It was established in the 1950s by Gottlieb Duttweiler, the founder of Switzerland's largest retailer. With the opening of the Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst in 1996, the collection was expanded, with each successive director leaving a distinct imprint on its evolution – albeit always in dialog with the latest developments in contemporary art.

Today, the museum on Limmatstrasse stands as Zurich's leading platform for contemporary art, due in no small part to its willingness to embrace new media and emerging artistic practices. Under Duttweiler, the collection was still largely centered around classical works, particularly those of Swiss artists. International artists were added later, and with the opening of the new museum in 1996, the focus shifted decisively towards collecting contemporary art.

The museum on Limmatstrasse is Zurich's leading platform for contemporary art.

In doing so, the museum adopted the dynamism of contemporary artistic production as its guiding principle. Its program evolved in response to the ever-changing nature of the art world and a growing willingness to challenge the traditional notion of what art should be. As a result, works created by artists for exhibitions are often acquired by the museum once the exhibition has ended. The close relationship between curating exhibitions and collecting art is a defining characteristic of the institution and the primary source of its enduring vitality.

A glance at the collection repository reveals one thing in particular: contemporary art repeatedly tests the limits of conservation and storage. Art handlers and conservators work in a field that evolves with the art itself. How can works be protected from decay? Will there ever be such a thing as a permanent media format? And to what extent must the wishes of artists be respected? Conservators and art handlers today have to look far and wide for answers.

Wear and tear as an art form

The largest work in the collection is located in the first hall: *Kaprow City* by Christoph Schlingensief. Little of it is visible, aside from a tightly packed cluster of wooden walls, some painted, others

Thomas Schütte, «Untitled», 1995 (from the series «United Enemies»), © 2026 Pro Litteris.

Rikrit Tiravanija, «Untitled», 1995 («Bon voyage Monsieur Ackermann»), © Rikrit Tiravanija.

Atelier van Lieshout, «Office/Reception Unit», 1996, © Atelier van Lieshout.

fitted with an assortment of monitors. These are the elements of an installation dating from 2006–07 that was more than 200 square meters in size. Schlingensief conceived the work as a theater set, and the work came directly from the theater when it was first exhibited at the museum.

"The work is deliberately chaotic and full of organic elements, which means it must be treated in a low-oxygen environment to eliminate pests after each exhibition. Every time the work is reinstalled, the question of how to reconstruct it has to be answered anew." Conservator Francisca Silva e Sousa points out that Schlingensief's *Kaprow City* is a work that accommodates wear and tear by design. The piece may not have been conceived specifically to deteriorate, as some of Dieter Roth's works were, but its decay is inherent in its construction.

How, then, should a work whose spirit may outlast the materials from which it is made be preserved? Primarily by documenting it through photography and film. Every work stored in the depot, whether or not it is at risk of deterioration, is subject to the same process: it is cataloged, photographed, described and measured. Though it's important to remember that electronic storage media themselves only have a finite lifespan.

Some works are naturally less challenging to store and pack, as is the case for a curious figure that lies uncovered on a nearby table. Maurizio Cattelan's *La rivoluzione siamo noi* (2000) is currently being prepared for transportation to Berlin's Nationalgalerie, which is dedicating a solo exhibition to the artist. The small man in the gray felt suit is one of the artist's alter egos. The head is packed separately. Once installed, the figure hangs from a coat rack – a macabre staging characteristic of Cattelan's work.

Acquired during the early years of the museum, the work is both a sculpture and an installation. Another work that can be said to combine two formats is located in the depot's dedicated painting storage racks: *Transition*, a canvas by Xanti Schawinsky dating from 1960. Measuring almost three by four meters, the painting is an abstract color composition overlaid with black tire tracks. Schawinsky drove a car back and forth over the canvas. The tracks are thus the record of a performance and an integral element of the painting. It is a landmark work, created by a pioneer of performance art.

Valuable classics

Handling the paintings stored on the mobile metal racks is comparatively straightforward. Some notable classics can be found here, such as a Warhol and a Richter, along with landscapes and portraits by Swiss painters obtained during the museum's early years. A more recent acquisition is a monumental patchwork triptych painting by the Polish artist Małgorzata Mirga-Tas, which was sourced directly from the Polish Pavilion at the 2024 Venice Biennale.

Mirga-Tas had lined the entire building with her work. It was the first time a Roma artist had represented a national pavilion. Created in 2022, Mirga-Tas' work combines multiple materials, bringing together textile-based patchwork and acrylic painting. Its vivid colors and symbolic scenes draw on the lives of women within Roma communities. Even in the confined space where the paintings are kept, the work retains its impact. It may well exemplify a broader development in contemporary art, one whose horizons have expanded through engagement with other cultures and traditions.

The Western gaze no longer holds a monopoly on how art is understood. Art has become more expansive in many respects – and not only in terms of the materials used. A tour of the museum's off-limits depot reveals far more than the challenges of storing and preserving contemporary works. It also shows the many new artistic directions being explored. If we accept that a work of art is inherently dynamic, then perhaps this very openness is the key to reconciling the apparent contradiction between preservation and decay. So where do we stand today? One thing is certain: the Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst remains closely connected with what is happening in contemporary art today.

Marinella Senatore's radical freedom

For the artist from southern Italy, human collaboration lies at the heart of her work. By building genuine communities with marginalized groups and prison inmates, Senatore creates works that resonate far beyond the contexts in which they emerge. The result is work that has earned widespread recognition.

SUSANNA KOEBERLE

"The world is small and we are large," reads the inscription on Marinella Senatore's artwork. It is currently on show in the exhibition space of "The Human Safety Net" in Venice. Part Baroque candelabra, part ceremonial pedestal, the sculpture belongs to a new generation of luminarie, or festive light installations. Senatore, who was born in southern Italy in 1977, gained international recognition through illuminated sculptures such as this. Last year, one such oversize light installation was exhibited at Art Basel Unlimited: "We rise by lifting others" and "I contain multitudes" appeared in giant letters across the 34-meter-long structure.

The quotations were selected by the inmates of a women's prison in Florence and residents of a socially disadvantaged neighborhood in Naples. The brightly illuminated structure creates an ambivalent effect. It is uplifting in one respect, yet also succeeds in touching viewers in a manner that is strangely affecting. This blend of exuberant energy and empathy is likely rooted in the participatory nature of the Italian artist's practice. Senatore does not simply champion ideas such as inclusion, community or coexistence before rushing into a project with whichever disadvantaged group happens to be at hand; instead, she builds genuine relationships with those who join her on her collaborative journey.

In doing so, she accepts the risk of not knowing in advance exactly how the final result will turn out. However, the results invariably reflect the relationships and shared experiences from which they emerge.

Marinella Senatore, «Dance First Think Later», 2023, Munich, © Pro Litteris. BARBARA DONAUBAUER/COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND MAZZOLENI, LONDON/TURIN

Marinella Senatore: visual artist. MAZEN JANNOUN/COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND MAZZOLENI, LONDON/TURIN

Marinella Senatore, «We Rise by Lifting Others», Baden-Baden, 2022, © Pro Litteris. VALENTIN BEHRINGER/COURTESY OF BADEN-BADEN EVENTS GMBH, THE ARTIST AND MAZZOLENI, LONDON/TURIN

In-depth research

It is easier to appreciate the scope and consistency of Senatore's work when one considers that, by her own account, she has worked in more than 23 countries and with around eight million people since 2003. At first glance, the figure seems implausibly high. Yet it becomes more believable after factoring in the many workshops, collaborations with schools, universities and museums, radio programs and online formats she has initiated over the years. As Senatore puts it, she has devoted her entire adult life to creating shared experiences, while sharing moments of conflict, vulnerability and learning with the people she works with.

Each collaborative project is preceded by in-depth research. Senatore often works with local NGOs, such as The Human Safety Net, the organization mentioned above. For this project, she worked with women in Italy and Poland – many of whom were minors – who had been victims of violence. For her, all individuals are important, while every life story and talent uncovered during her workshops finds its way into the work as it takes shape.

Her multidisciplinary approach is also rooted in her own background. Alongside her studies in art history in Naples, which culminated in a PhD, Senatore trained as a violinist at a conservatory and later performed with a professional orchestra.

She went on to study at the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia in Rome, specializing in photography and lighting. She then spent eight years working on film sets while developing her artistic practice. Her true passion, however, lay in art and the radical freedom it offered. What she carried over from these other disciplines was an appreciation of human collaboration – what she describes as the "orchestral" and "choral" dimensions of creative work.

This convergence of different voices and practices lies at the heart of Senatore's remarkable body of work. Rather than creating art for the much-criticized "ivory tower" audience, she succeeds in making her work accessible not only to her collaborators, but also to those who encounter it. As she puts it, most of her work takes place on the street.

The ultimate goal

Senatore is alluding in part to the parades she stages in public spaces. In 2012, she created the School of Narrative Dance (SOND), a framework for this type of collective, body-based practice. In the run-up to the parades, which often take place in an artistic context such as Manifesta in Palermo in 2018, Senatore issued an open call. She was primarily looking for amateurs of all ages from various disciplines, including music, singing, folk dance, acrobatics, ballet and other physical activities such as parkour.

The aim was never to create a tightly rehearsed choreography. As Senatore readily admits, she herself has no expertise in any of these fields. But where there is movement, there is life. Drawing on her own positive experiences, Senatore usually incorporates elements of somatic therapy into her workshops, a body-centered approach that is also used in trauma recovery. In doing so, she transforms science into art. Economists, neuroscientists, sociologists and therapists all form part of her wider network. The ultimate goal, however, remains the creation of a work of art.

In the case of the actions and parades, these works are ephemeral by nature. Even so, all of Senatore's projects, including those that collectors can acquire through galleries, are rooted in collaboration and exchange. She doesn't see herself as a therapist. Nevertheless, she says that over the years she has come to realize this is both her gift and her purpose: to bring together the energies of different people and make them feel better.

Collective rituals

For these reasons, Senatore's work speaks to a fundamental potential of art itself: drawing on collaborations across a wide range of cultural contexts, including with Black Lives Matter and Pussy Riot, she has identified a deficiency that cuts across cultures and societies alike: the absence of a sense of belonging. In her view, this crisis is a global phenomenon. As Senatore's sees it, the antidote lies in collective rituals and their capacity to create new forms of community. Creating such rituals within the framework of art is one approach that seems to work.

The artist is equally attentive to the production of her non-ephemeral works. Some pieces, such as collages and drawings, are created in the studio within her apartment in Rome. Others are simply too large and too complex. Her monumental luminaria, for example, are produced in factories in Puglia, where local artists and craftspeople draw on their wealth of experience. There is scarcely a town in southern Italy where such illuminated structures do not glow during religious and civic celebrations, a tradition dating back to the Baroque period. It was then that rulers began staging public festivities for the wider public. Today, the iconography of these temporary light architectures and festive settings informs Senatore's work.

Her illuminated sculptures harness the energy of collective celebration in the service of her own messages. She draws on the shared and archetypal language of the festival, reinterpreting it as a form of resistance. Her vast illuminated structures create new public spaces while also serving as vehicles for slogans that can be distinctly subversive in tone. "FESTA!" was also the title of her solo exhibition this year at the Milan headquarters of Mazzoleni, her Italian gallery. She intends the title in a most political sense.

The same ambition is reflected in her recent textile works, which occupy a space between banner, drawing and collage. In Senatore's hands, these *arazzi* (banners) are not vehicles for advertising but rather manifestos of humanity. For some time now, she has had her embroidered textile works produced at the Chanakya School of Craft in Mumbai. The organization trains women from marginalized backgrounds, providing them with work, financial independence and future prospects. Each work involves the contribution of around ten people.

By supporting organizations such as these and creating new communities through her projects, Senatore celebrates the enduring strength of human solidarity. And as viewers we gain from this, too.

> Her banners are less vehicles for advertising and more manifestos of humanity.

Experience the work firsthand

On August 21, 2026, two light installations will be inaugurated in St. Moritz as part of the *Reflection* program, accompanied by a parade created specifically for the occasion. The Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea (GNAMC) in Rome is hosting a solo exhibition devoted to Marinella Senatore through to December 31, 2026. The works created for The Human Safety Net in Venice will remain on view until March 22, 2027.

18.–21.06.2026 | VIP PREVIEW: 16.–17.06.2026 ART BASEL IN BASEL | RUNDHOF, HALL 2

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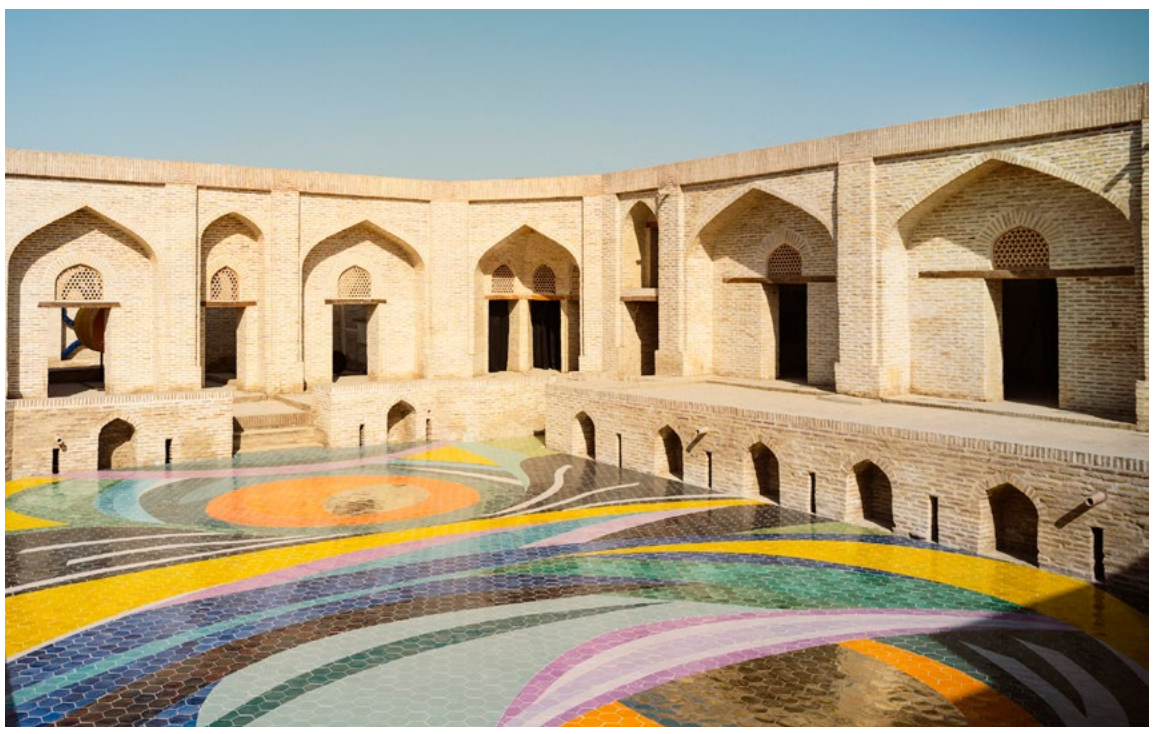
View of the Uzbekistan Pavilion at the 61st Venice Biennale: (background) A.A. Murakami, «The Sun Sets in a Shell», 2026 (produced with the support of Mandarin Knitting Technology and Zegna Baruffa Lane Borgosesia), (foreground) Zi Kakhramonova, Archive of Lost Forms: «The Aural Sea» (installation view), 2026. PRESS IMAGE



Installation at the inaugural Bukhara Biennial, held from September 5 to November 23, 2025: Marina Perez Simão in collaboration with Bakhtiyar Babamuradov, 2024–2025. FELIX ODELL/COURTESY OF ACDF AND BUKHARA BIENNIAL 2025

Uzbekistan: a country discovering its future through art

A center for contemporary art in Tashkent, a biennial in Bukhara and a pavilion in Venice: Uzbekistan's path into modernity is unfolding at the intersection of craft and conceptual art.

SABINE B. VOGEL

The room feels like a hiding place. Dark and packed to the ceiling. Stretcher frames lean against the wall, pictures pile up under the false ceiling, and books are everywhere. This is where Vyacheslav Akhunov, born in 1948, works. When he moved here in the 1980s, Uzbekistan was still part of the Soviet Union. His studio, along with an apartment next door in the same prefabricated building, came rent-free – a privilege. The price was adherence to the party line: paintings in the style of Socialist Realism.

Akhunov smiles as he recalls it. "No one in Moscow knew it," he says, "but I was always a conceptual artist". And, adds Gayane Umerova, he was not just part of the early wave of such artists, but was the very first in Uzbekistan. "Contemporary art in Uzbekistan begins with Akhunov."

Umerova has headed the state-owned Art and Culture Development Foundation (ACDF) since 2017. The year is no coincidence. It marked a turning point for the Central Asian nation, which, following independence in 1991, spent many years under the rule of the dictator Islam Karimov. When Shavkat Mirziyoyev came to power in 2016, he began opening up a country that had long remained largely isolated from the outside world. He abolished exit visas, reformed the administration and relaxed state controls, including in the cultural sphere. Where official attention had previously focused on a carefully curated national narrative, a new spirit has since emerged under the slogan "A bridge between tradition and modernity".

Heralds of a new era

Today, Uzbekistan is home to 38 million inhabitants, almost half of whom are under 25. The aim is to create jobs in the creative industry for this new generation. But culture also serves as a form of soft power, helping to reshape the country's image and secure its place on the global art map. The starting point lies in the past. Craftsmanship, ornamentation, materials. And architecture: the so-called "Tashkent Modernism".

After the devastating earthquake of 1966, the Soviet authorities resolved to rebuild Tashkent as a "showcase of the Soviet East". Modernist architecture was combined with white concrete arabesques and blue ceramic cladding. In this way, the city's facades became heralds of a new era.

Much of this heritage later disappeared behind advertising hoardings. They are now banned. In Tashkent, landmark buildings such as the Peoples' Friendship Palace and the former Stalin Museum are undergoing restoration, while new institutions are also taking shape, including a universal museum designed by Tadao Ando and the CCA (Center for Contemporary Arts). The latter had originally been due to open in March, but that would have been "inappropriate in a time of war involving Iran," says the institution's Iranian-born artistic director Sara Reza.

Speaking during a site visit, architect Olivier Marty of the French practice Studio KO explains that a number of details still need to be completed before the exhibition and residency program begins in September. The real centerpiece of Uzbekistan's new cultural strategy lies further west, in the former oasis city of Bukhara. In November 2025, the city hosted the inaugural Bukhara Biennial, an event that is intended to be far more than an exhibition.It serves as a gateway to contemporary art for local audiences. It is also a proving ground for a new generation of curators, some of whom went on to curate the Uzbekistan Pavilion at the 61st Venice Biennale.

At the same time, the Bukhara Biennial is a statement of intent: "Our aim is not to promote a particular notion of Uzbek national identity through these cultural projects," states Umerova. "Rather, we want to preserve traditional crafts and connect them with contemporary art." Seventy works were installed throughout the restored old city, many of them created in close collaboration with local ceramicists, textile makers and carpet weavers, part of a broader rediscovery of craft traditions.

In a caravanserai, one of the historic inns that once lined the great trade routes, with small chambers arranged around an open courtyard, the Egyptian artist Wael Shawky presented brass reliefs engraved with intricate imagery that shimmered in the sunlight. "My work explores the nostalgia of Islamic memory," he explains. The imagery draws on the tradition of miniature painting, while the material evokes the gold leaf associated with Persian art.

Marina Perez Simão transformed the entire courtyard into a vibrant field of ceramic patterns. "We want to build an international cultural diplomacy and develop new infrastructure within the country," says Umerova, in summary of the strategy. "But we are proceeding carefully. We don't want to offer too much support; we want to inspire people to create an independent art scene." Yet some essential ingredients are still missing. Collectors? Few. An art market? Nowhere to be seen. When asked where he used to sell his work, conceptual artist Akhunov's answer is brief: "I didn't."

In the Soviet era, the state was the only buyer, and he never offered his work to it in the first place. "My art was banned." It was too subversive. In one work, he took the hefty state-published volume *Soviet Art*, removed every page and recreated the book with his own collages. Page after page of Lenin silhouettes filled with newspaper clippings and imagery ranging from nude women to details of images borrowed from art history.

His canvases are equally rigorous in their conceptual approach. One is den-

Installation «Blue Room» in Bukhara: Abdulvahid Bukhoriy in collaboration with Jurabek Siddikov, 2024–2025. FELIX ODELL/COURTESY OF ACDF, BUKHARA BIENNIAL 2025

View inside the studio of Vyacheslav Akhunov in Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan. PRESS IMAGE

Installation view of «Instrument of Minds» at the 61st Venice Biennale in Palazzo Franchetti: Vyacheslav Akhunov, «Triumphal Arch», 1979/2026. GERDASTUDIO

sely covered with the words "breathe slowly and quietly". The words refer to mantras and the power of endless repetition. Back then, he explains, he had to exist quietly and invisibly. Today, conditions for artists have improved considerably. Nothing is prohibited any longer, neither tapestries nor what Akhunov calls "Muslim magic", or practices based on shamanic traditions.

Yet freedom alone does not create infrastructure. A handful of galleries have begun to emerge, among them Regeneration Art and Bon Factum in Tashkent and Art Station in Samarkand. Even so, as Zi Kakhramonova puts it, "Art is not yet part of society". She is one of seven artists exhibiting in the Uzbekistan Pavilion at the 61st Venice Biennale. Everything here revolves around the Aral Sea. Once the fourth-largest inland lake in the world, it is now a desert.

The vanished sea

"Welcome to the center of an environmental catastrophe," summarizes our guide, Yussuf. In 1985, he explains, the shoreline at Moynaq, once a thriving port in the autonomous Republic of Karakalpakstan, had retreated by five kilometers. This was no coincidence. The destruction of the sea had been set in motion in the 1960s, when the Soviet Union diverted the rivers that fed it in order to irrigate agricultural land and create new areas for cotton cultivation – a disastrous decision.

Today, 90% of the portion of the Aral Sea located within Uzbekistan has become steppe. Only 12,000 inhabitants still live here. The airport is rarely used, while the tall perimeter fence was torn down by powerful winds and never repaired. Those winds continue to carry salt, sand and pollutants deposited on the exposed seabed across the surrounding farmland. Twice a year, the fields must be flooded simply to make cultivation possible. Along the former shoreline, rusting ships decay in the steppe. Two vessels – brand new at the time – were placed on the sand in 2010 during a visit by the UN Secretary-General to illustrate the scale of the disaster. Others were added later and now lie like skeletal remains in a harbor that no longer exists, scattered among rows of carefully planted saxaul shrubs. Highly resistant to drought and salinity, these plants are intended to help stabilize the Aralkum Desert.

It is this vanished sea that lies at the center of Uzbekistan's contribution to this year's Venice Biennale. Among the participants is 21-year-old Aigul Sarsen. She lives in Nukus, the capital of Karkalpakstan, about three hours by car from the Aral Sea. Her studio is located in a vacant house that she shares with "more than ten other artists", she says, though she does not know the exact number. "We hardly ever see each other. Everyone works on their own." For Venice, she had only a few months to prepare. She sees her sketches and expressive paintings as expressions of "hope that the sea will one day return". The sea she never knew takes shape in her imagination as a goddess, a female hybrid being.

Forbidden art

Nukus is also home to the remarkable Savitsky Museum, founded in 1966 and named after the collector Igor Savitsky, who amassed more than 100,000 works, many dating from the 1920s. It is also called the "Museum of Forbidden Art" since works by Aleksandr Sardan, Sergey Shigolev and Vasiliy Lilsenko were banned at the time. Today they are grouped under the label "Avanguardia Orientalis". These paintings do not derive their power from exoticism, but are rather rooted in the region itself: the desert, caravan routes and oases rendered in dazzling bursts of color.

The museum shop sells yellowing posters. Our hotel in Nukus even has acrylic paintings for sale, each stacked against the next, none bearing an artist's name. The price is 600,000 sum per canvas – roughly €43. Uzbekistan is still in the early stages of developing a functioning art scene. Yet thanks in large part to its presence at the Venice Biennale, it has already reached a global audience. Several artists featured in recent editions have gone on to exhibit internationally, among them Saodat Ismailova, whose work has been shown at the Swiss Institute in New York.

Between salt and steppe: the dried-up Aral Sea as an artistic subject for a nation.

Akhunov, who has a prominent presence in the collateral program of this year's Venice Biennale, is hoping for a similar trajectory. He did participate in Documenta as early as 2012, where *1m²* was exhibited: 400 empty matchboxes, their inner surfaces painted, collaged and inscribed – a miniature exhibition that can be concealed again at any moment. Only now, however, with his major retrospective in the magnificent Palazzo Franchetti, is he able to present the full breadth of his work. Immediately upon entering, visitors pass through *Triumphal Arch* (1979/2026), a four-meter-high structure whose walls contain 365 metal scissors – they serve as a symbol of censorship and state control.

In *Mantras of the USSR*, Akhunov deconstructs the ideological language of the Soviet Union. *Instrument of Minds*, he says, is not about the past, but about "how thoughts survive". Those ideas are now inspiring a younger generation for whom conceptual art has become second nature, including Zi Kakhramonova. She is keen to stress that she does not want to portray the Aral Sea's disappearance solely as a catastrophe. Her *Archive of Lost Forms* occupies the center of the room, filled with salt from which ceramic creatures emerge as though from another age. She responds to the loss of the Aral Sea's biodiversity with imagined forms and new possibilities. What becomes clear throughout these projects is that Uzbekistan is discovering art not merely as a form of cultural heritage, but as a means of imagining the future.

Mumbai reinvents the museum

The richest family in India has created an institution for contemporary art and culture that could also set a precedent in the West. But there is something else that Europe could learn from India's booming art scene.

The Art House is a four-story, 1,500-square-meter exhibition space at the Nita Mukesh Ambani Cultural Centre (NMACC), a multidisciplinary cultural institution in Mumbai that opened on March 31, 2023. PHOTOS: NMACC

LAURA HELENA WURTH
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In the modern age, what possibilities are there for a place where art is displayed? The Nita Mukesh Ambani Cultural Centre, or NMACC for short, is currently experimenting with a new kind of museum. The young cultural institution in Mumbai's museum scene was founded in 2023 by Nita Ambani, wife of wealthy entrepreneur and heir Mukesh Ambani. The Ambani family is considered the most influential economic dynasty in India: their fortune stems from the oil industry, and various family members regularly feature on Forbes' lists of the world's richest people. The Ambanis have also risen to prominence in the West since the spectacular wedding of Anant Ambani, the couple's son, in 2024 – among other high-profile celebrities, Rihanna and the Kardashians were flown in for the festivities, which, according to various reports, cost up to a billion dollars.

The NMACC, as it is known for short, is launching an ambitious cultural and art program in Mumbai. It brings internationally renowned artists such as Doug Aitken and Toiletpaper, a project by the two Italian artists Maurizio Cattelan and Pierpaolo Ferrari, to Mumbai and enables them to create new works, which will then be exhibited at the Art House. At the same time, the cultural institution seeks to elevate Indian artists to the international stage and to adequately represent contemporary Indian art. For example, the NMACC, in collaboration with the Indian Ministry of Culture, provided huge support for the Indian Pavilion at this year's 61st Biennale in Venice. After a seven-year hiatus, the pavilion is dedicated to the concept of home, including what it means, what it looks like and how to deal with the idea of "home" when it has been lost.

More attention

India is not a regular visitor to Venice. The world's most populous country was represented for the first time in 2011, and then did not return until 2019. However, given the rising importance of South Asian art markets, the rapidly growing number of collectors and the country's steadily increasing prosperity, the time seems ripe for India to be represented at what is still the most important art exhibition in the world. But while the NMACC in Mumbai functions as a kind of large interactive center, the pavilion in Venice remains small, intimate and bathed in dim light. The narrow door leading to the exhibition is easily overlooked. Once it closes behind a visitor, however, they feel as though they have left Italy behind – the five artistic perspectives of India appear almost traditional, likely by design. Under the title: "Geographies of Distance: Remembering Home", the exhibition brings together expansive works made of wood, bamboo, clay and papier-mâché by artists hailing from different regions of India. Giant blossoms by Ranjani Shettar run along one wall, while the outlines of a house, finely woven like a delicate dress, float along the other.

Multi-award-winning Indian-American artist Sumakshi Singh has made fine structures out of silk, cotton and nylon that create the impression of a long-forgotten home that now only appears in a dream. Although they are still visible and perceptible, they seem to be already in the process of disappearing. In times of mass migration, in which thousands upon thousands of people are forced to leave their homes in the hope of a better or simply a safe life, this work takes on a sense of urgency.

The fragile moment in between is also portrayed by New Delhi-based artist Asim Waqif. His installation consists of large, roughly assembled bamboo poles piled up directly at the entrance, where it is unclear whether a structure intended as a home is being demolished or built. All the works on display describe in different ways this state of limbo that unites so many people in this vast country: arriving, building, moving on, arriving again and building again …

View of the exhibition «Run As Slow As You Can» by Toiletpaper, which was shown at the Nita Mukesh Ambani Cultural Centre from July 22 to October 22, 2023.

Mukesh Ambani with his wife Nita – she founded the museum in Mumbai.

«Geographies of Distance: Remembering Home»: View of the Indian Pavilion at the 61st Biennale di Venezia (Arte), which runs until November 21, 2026. JOE HABBEN

It's no surprise that the NMACC is now co-financing this presentation of Indian art on the world's largest international art stage. In a world in which new conflicts are constantly emerging, the Biennale is especially important as a venue for art as a form of soft power. One of India's most influential families is therefore making use of this stage as well.

Art as soft power

In Mumbai, the NMACC is located in a purpose-built structure in the Business District, more reminiscent of a large, architecturally extravagant mall than traditional Indian design. Here, there is little that corresponds to the cliché of crowded Indian streets or richly decorated traditional temples and palaces. The streets are deserted; people are inside the air-conditioned hotels, malls and conference centers that shape the face of this district.

The Art House, in which the exhibitions take place, is just one part of the NMACC. There is also the glittering Convention Centre, which, in addition to one of the largest passenger elevators in the world, houses three theaters, multiple rooms for private parties, several restaurants and cafés, as well as an "Infinity Room" by Yayoi Kusama in which visitors can immerse themselves. A Porsche once drove through the lobby for a car show.

Works by Indian artists are displayed throughout the building, while artisans from various regions of India present their offerings in small booths on the ground floor. This is a kind of residency program showcasing different arts, from jewelry making to carpet weaving, with the artisans and artists living and working here for several months. The art exhibitions are embedded within many different forms of cultural expression, all of which find their place here. Someone who has come to see a musical might also end up visiting the art exhibition, and someone who wanted to see the art might also learn something interesting about a specific traditional weaving technique from a region of India.

This mixture of genres and forms of representation is hard to find in the often-categorized and classified European museum world. Yet this blending perhaps comes closest to a modern idea of the "Museion": a museum district in which people live, work and conduct research. In ancient times, the "Museion" was not a single building, but rather a cluster of many smaller buildings – a vibrant place where people not only created and experienced art in various forms, but also ate, drank and sometimes probably even slept as well.

It is not only because of this concept of diversity that the institution NMACC holds a special position in Mumbai – one that clearly sets it apart from the other museums and cultural sites of the megacity: it is also larger and better financed than the public museums and can therefore also host exhibitions that require certain climatic or technical conditions.

Growing art market

India's contemporary art galleries are also moving into the international market, strengthening their positions through joint initiatives. For example, during Mumbai Gallery Weekend, the galleries kick off the season together to showcase the diversity of the art scene. The city has also played host to Art Mumbai since 2023, an annual international art fair that welcomes many international galleries, alongside Indian ones. Networking within the international art world while establishing oneself as an independent player seems to be increasing in importance.

India's economic growth has accelerated rapidly since the COVID-19 pandemic, a trend reflected in the growing interest in contemporary art. At the same time, the Western art world is broadening its horizons – it is well worth keeping an eye on the evolution of India's cultural landscape. Some European museums could certainly draw inspiration from the NMACC's concept.

NZZ | Art Presenting Partner

Pablo Picasso «Personnages», 1965

Completed on April 11, 1965, «Personnages» belongs to the final phase of Picasso's career, when the human figure returned with particular urgency in his work. The nearly two-meter-long oil on canvas centers on a figure that recalls the torero, one of Picasso's enduring subjects. By this point, the matador carried decades of personal and pictorial history, reaching back to the bullfights of his Spanish childhood while, in the late work, becoming a figure of spectacle and exposure. Picasso sets him among a group of characters that call back to distinct phases of his career. A nude turns her back to the viewer, her buttocks placed squarely at the center of the figure. To the right, a face in profile is drawn in broad, cubist strokes. A round head appears with blue and muted pink across the face and shoulders. The background moves through diffuse gray and petrol-blue tones, with a few golden elements around the torero. The cast of figures is arranged in a row before the viewer, while a broad swath of canvas remains open beside them, as though more characters might yet appear.

The painting was made when Picasso was eighty-three and living in increasing seclusion in the south of France. In 1961, he and his wife Jacqueline Roque had settled in Mougins, where his final period of work unfolded. By then, Picasso had spent nearly eight decades remaking his visual language. The emotional austerity of the Blue Period, the fractured pictorial structure of Cubism, and the political force of «Guernica» already stood behind him. In the 1950s, he had also turned repeatedly to earlier masters, reworking compositions by Delacroix, Velázquez, and Manet. His late paintings emerge from that long history of reinvention. They return to subjects that had accompanied him across his career while pushing them into a more immediate and materially direct pictorial language.

«Personnages» belongs to that late body of work through its expansive scale and its return to the torero as a theatrical figure. It also comes at a moment when Picasso was concentrating intensely on figural compositions. In 1964, he began the painter-and-model series that would become central to his final decade. Across the works of these years, nudes, musketeers, matadors, seated figures, and composite heads recur with striking frequency. «Personnages» draws on this late company of figures while retaining its own unusual structure, one of a dense group gathered on the canvas, set against an open field that remains available to further arrival.

The painting's provenance, verified by the Art Loss Register (ALR), also reflects the sustained attention the work has received. After passing through private collections in Switzerland and Sweden, it entered a Danish collection and appeared in major London evening sales at Sotheby's in 1999 and Christie's in 2010. From that Danish collection, «Personnages» was featured in the 2010/11 exhibition «Picasso: Peace and Freedom», which traveled from Tate Liverpool to the Albertina in Vienna before reaching the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Humlebæk, Denmark, situating it within a broader and contemporary reassessment of Picasso's late work.

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Pablo Picasso, «Personnages», 1965
Oil on canvas
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Signed «Picasso» (front side, upper right), dated «11.4.65.» (on the reverse)
© Succession Picasso / 2026, Pro Litteris, Zurich. Photo: Moritz Beichl

The takeover of galleries by artificial intelligence

Artificial intelligence is widely used in the art market every day. But a clear strategy is lacking.

ANDREAS KNITTER

For many years, the art market and new technologies were not exactly the best of friends. It was only the paradigm shift that took place practically overnight – and not entirely voluntarily – as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic that made the use of new technologies socially acceptable. Today, even expensive art is bought online, transactions are recorded on the blockchain and new AI tools promise valuable assistance in addressing crucial questions of art authenticity and the detection of forgeries.

All of this helps to make the art market more transparent and legally secure. Even the rise and fall of the dubious phenomenon of NFTs – anti-forgery digital certificates of ownership for artworks – has at least ensured that, since then, issues related to technology, artificial intelligence (AI) and intellectual property have taken on an important role in the production of art, one that has suddenly extended to the art market itself.

However, a recent survey now highlights an area that has so far received little attention: AI is already widely used in the everyday work of commercial galleries, but largely without any oversight.

Art with AI: Dirk Koy, «Shape Study 06», 2019, photography, animation, still. DIRK KOY

Without guidance or strategy

According to the "AI in Galleries" report published in March 2026 by the art industry network "First Thursday", 84 percent of the galleries surveyed stated that they use AI tools in their daily work. But only 8 percent say they have formal guidelines that govern how these tools are used. The results are based on interviews with more than a hundred gallery professionals around the world, including owners, executives and employees, mainly in Europe, the UK and the US.

The report paints a picture of an industry that is introducing new technologies stealthily and quietly, without implementing thorough guidance or strategy for their use. Even when looking at the data in detail, the conclusions range from remarkable to alarming: in most cases, AI is introduced informally and on employees' own initiative rather than as a result of decisions by the gallery's senior management.

82 percent of respondents say they access AI through personal accounts and not through tools set up and monitored by their gallery. Only 18 percent report that they have been provided with special accounts for the workplace. Complicating matters further, the current AI tools are not specifically designed for art and the art market and the unique needs associated with this. Most respondents state that they are much more likely to rely on general platforms such as ChatGPT, Claude and Gemini than on art-specific AI tools, although the question arises as to whether such tools even exist.

AI in galleries: 84 percent use it, only 8 percent have guidelines.

The gaps revealed raise questions about how sensitive data is handled, especially in an industry that traditionally places great value on discretion to build trust. Without clear guidelines, gallery employees may enter confidential information into open platforms that cannot be monitored or controlled by gallery management. This may include the names and personal details of collectors, sales histories, reports on the condition of works or price negotiations.

Despite these apparent concerns, it's clear that AI tools are already being used for a variety of tasks, with writing and editing texts the most common: 78 percent of respondents say they use AI to draft press releases or emails. More than half use AI for translations, while others use it for social media posts, administrative tasks, market research and when searching for specific collectors.

Most respondents point out that the increasing complexity of day-to-day gallery operations is driving this change forward. Almost four out of five galleries report that running their businesses has become even more challenging in the last two years; administrative burdens are increasing due to constantly changing regulatory requirements, and art fairs, logistics and insurance are becoming more expensive.

Yet rather than introducing AI as part of a formal digital strategy, its use in practice is often simply in response to practical needs, such as saving time on repetitive tasks in already overburdened gallery teams. This development seems inevitable, considering that the art gallery model has always relied on low-cost interns and assistants.

AI threatens real expertise

In this context, it seems astonishing that art gallery employees are not afraid of losing their jobs. Only around 29 percent of respondents cite AI as a risk to employment. The accuracy and correctness of the research results obtained through AI is viewed as a much bigger problem. Two-thirds of respondents say they are concerned about inferior and erroneous content generated by AI, which takes a long time to check.

Nevertheless, the attitude towards the technology is predominantly positive. 62 percent of respondents see the introduction of AI in the art market as a useful development, and more than half are prepared to invest in new technology if it can achieve measurable benefits. Above all, however, the survey results reveal a gap between gallery employees and management: employees are eager to use AI systems on their own initiative, but receive hardly any instructions from above.

The fact that the vast majority access these tools through personal accounts without corporate governance or a binding privacy policy must be a wake-up call for the entire industry. What is missing is a bridge between individual approaches and institutional responsibility – with data protection guidelines, training and specially developed tools that translate isolated private use into sustainable and well thought-out practice.

Galleries must build this bridge. The content-related consequences of the uncontrolled use of AI in galleries pose the most serious threat: how can the art dealer and gallery owner protect discernment, security and trust in the age of AI-generated research results? Today, we are in danger of drowning in a sea of glossy articles and publications, confidently presented opinions and structured conclusions – and much of what is produced using AI feels fatally over-styled, embellished with clichés and excessively polished, all too often even empty.

In the field of art trading, as is well known, knowledge is not about sounding intelligent. True expertise in the subject matter is built on a wealth of personal experience: years of watching, listening, reading, arguing, countless visits to museum and gallery exhibitions, artists' studios and art fairs. Added to this is an understanding of artists and their work, of institutions and of a multitude of different art markets, each with their own unique characteristics.

AI has already largely infiltrated the gallery world. What is ultimately troubling, however, is not the technology itself, but the ease with which it can create an illusion of authority when used without reflection or control. For collectors and traders, trust is everything. When everyone suddenly sounds like an expert, the risk lies not only in poor or incorrectly worded content, but also in the loss of trust in real expertise.

Andreas Ritter is an attorney for art law based in Zurich and Managing Director of Verband Kunstmarkt Schweiz, the umbrella organization for four art trade associations.

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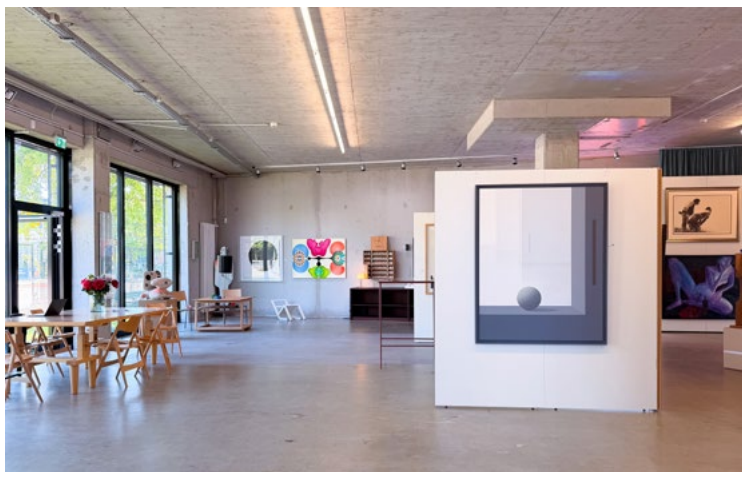
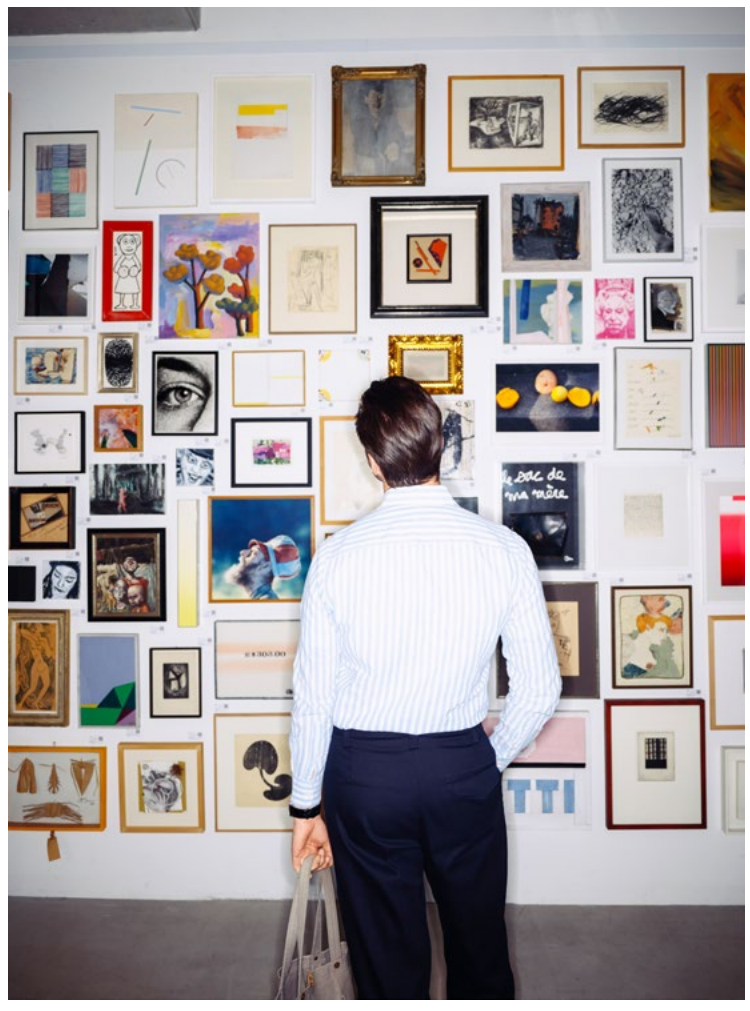
Young and different: the Auktionshaus am Grunewald forges its own path

There's a new auction house in Berlin geared especially towards young collectors and art lovers. Here, artworks by big names can be bought at auction for as little as EUR 100.

DAGHILD BARTELS





The Auktionshaus am Grunewald in Berlin specializes in 20th- and 21st-century art with a focus on works after 1945. PHOTOS: AUKTIONSHAUS AM GRUNEWALD

The founders have nothing to do with Berlin's famous Grunewald forest. The name, "Auktionshaus am Grunewald", is a little quirky, because the newcomer wants to stand out from the existing, established auction houses. Art for everyone, especially young people, is the motto – and it works. The Auktionshaus am Grunewald has been making headlines since 2023 with its astonishingly rapid success.

Lena Winter and Sebastian Greber are the courageous pioneers who took the risk of invigorating the scene with a new auction house three years ago – right as the art market was faltering. Lena Winter is an art historian and already has experience in the field, having worked for the well-established auction house Grisebach for nine years. Sebastian Greber worked in design and started auctions in his apartment during the pandemic. In 2023, the two decided to open a new type of auction house. They started in gallery-like spaces near the Kurfürstendamm, which quickly became too small.

With a stroke of luck, they were able to rent a floor in the magnificent building that Berlin gallery owner Michael Haas had built to serve as his huge storage facility. Now the auction house resides in the north of Charlottenburg and is putting into practice its motto: to take a different approach to art auctions and never become like the traditional auction houses. The enthusiasm and relaxed atmosphere, combined with the pioneering spirit with which the deliberately small team – five people, and ideally no more – approaches its work, quickly rub off on both consignors and buyers.

This is already evident during the pre-auction viewing: while established auction houses exude an air of exclusivity and a dignified atmosphere, the Auktionshaus am Grunewald keeps things informal. The presentation of the latest auction – some 1,400 works hung side by side on the walls – leaves no room for any sense of elitism. The – mostly – paper works, i.e. drawings, prints, photos, which enter the auction house framed, are presented as a colorful potpourri from the art of classical modernism to the latest contemporary art.

A relaxed atmosphere

There's no tedious leafing through drawings or prints in various portfolios: here a great Robert Rauschenberg hangs next to a complete unknown; a work by Neo Rauch is followed by Daniel Spoerri, Wolfgang Tillmans, Blinky Palermo or Norbert Bisky and Günther Uecker. The minimum bid has been deliberately set extremely low – artworks can be purchased from as little as EUR 100. And both auctioneers emphasize that the EUR 100 minimum is here to stay. With this policy, they have indeed tapped into a new, young audience.

"Some people have purchased art here for the first time in their lives," says Lena Winter. The entrepreneurs know that this idea and their unique position have closed a gap in the market. Both proudly report that they have been able to sell around 80 percent of the lots at their auctions so far, and that they have increased their sales by 50 percent each auction – because even seasoned collectors are now among the customers who come here to discover new pieces.

Despite the relaxed atmosphere, the work remains highly professional. All data and information about the artists in the online catalog is presented in meticulous detail and with a high degree of expertise. The auctions themselves are conducted with just as much professionalism; the dramaturgy is no different from that of established auction houses. They are also moving closer to the big auction houses when it comes to premiums: buyers pay 34 percent, while consignors pay a variable 24 percent.

It is admirable how patiently Lena Winter waits for the next EUR 20 increment after calling out a EUR 100 bid, before finally bringing down the hammer. A child once tried to speed up the proceedings by shouting "sold", but this only added to the atmosphere.

Coffee by the gallon

The most recent auction, its fifth, which lasted for three days, was closed with impressive sales of EUR 1.75 million. The record was set by the Venezuelan-French artist Cruz-Diez, whose work sold for EUR 46,260. A triptych by Roy Lichtenstein sparked a fierce bidding battle; the final price was EUR 43,690, a world record for a Lichtenstein print.

The newcomer's activities are being watched closely outside of Berlin, even overseas – 395 lots (out of 1,400) went to destinations including Shanghai, New York, Sao Paulo, Madrid, Vienna and Paris. Three works found their way directly into a museum. These days, entire estates are delivered to the Auktionshaus am Grunewald, such as that of German actor Otto Sander. The estate of Friedhelm Hütte, the long-time head of the art department of Deutsche Bank, was also auctioned here.

"We are growing with our customers," say the two ambitious auctioneers, "but we want to preserve our special position." That's why, as we also learn, they drank 38 liters of coffee and used 232 rolls of tape during the auction period. The next auction is already on the horizon, and will take place on September 18.

aagrunewald.de

The two minds behind the Auktionshaus am Grunewald: Sebastian Greber and Lena Winter. ALEXANDER ANUFRIEV

Fighting the bourgeoisification of art – the lasting influence of Konrad Fischer

In 1969, Konrad Fischer organized the radical show «When Attitudes Become Form» at the Kunsthalle Bern. The legendary gallery owner became an advocate of minimal art and conceptual art. The spirit of the gallery he founded continues to influence the art world today.

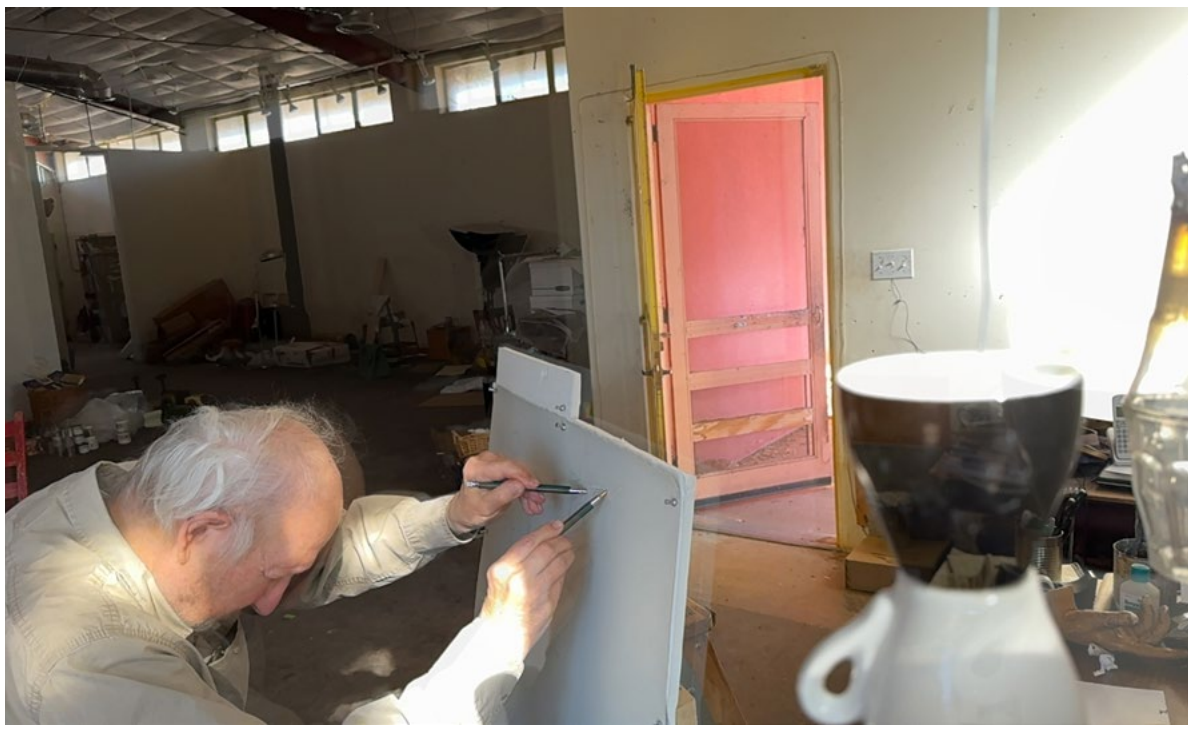
ANNEGRET ERHARD

When Düsseldorf was emerging as Germany's art capital in the early 1960s, the impassioned post-war spirit of Informel – an abstract, expressive and unstructured art movement of the 1950s – began to lose steam and lapse into empty repetition. At that time, in rejection of established art movements, three young artists joined forces: Gerhard Richter, Sigmar Polke and Konrad Lueg, who would later become a well-known gallery owner under the name Konrad Fischer. They were classmates at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf. The trio were regarded as disruptive figures in the local avant-garde, because they were nonconformist and progressive.

That era marked a tough time for contemporary art. In 1963, Gerhard Richter and Konrad Lueg organized an exhibition at the Düsseldorf furniture store Berges entitled "Life with Pop – A Demonstration for Capitalist Realism". It was a manifesto. With Pop Art, Nouveau Réalisme, Happening and Fluxus, they made unrestrained and ironic reference to the contemporary reality of life during the years of the German economic miracle, to the rigid façade of bourgeois affluence and draconian consumerism.

Konrad Fischer had taken the alias Lueg, his mother's maiden name. His favorite subjects were soccer players and boxers, the new heroes, but also pattern paintings featuring repeating designs such as those found on wallpaper or tablecloths. In this way, Fischer worked his way through the trivialities of mass culture. At the same time, his extraordinary gift as a networker, as a mediator, as a convincing communicator became increasingly apparent. The idea of turning to gallery work grew. He did not foresee a great career as an artist, at least not to the extent that was already on the horizon for his colleagues Polke and Richter.

But he did not envision himself in the role of a respectable businessman, either. As he wrote to his friend Kasper König, who would later become a leading figure in his field as a curator, in New York, his gallery would be "… more forward-thinking and progressive than the others in Germany. What is initially lacking in financial resources must be compensated for by quality, vision, courage and freshness. I want to breathe fresh life into Germany's fusty, provincial cultural scene, and I believe that this is also important and beneficial for many of our artists here; otherwise, they will become more and more bourgeois."



Video still: Bruce Naumann, «No.54 Suspended Still Life Susan's South Eyes Closed», 2025, © Pro Litteris.

Gallery owner Konrad Fischer (right) in the 1960s together with the performance artist Joseph Beuys.

PHOTOS: KONRAD FISCHER GALERIE

A family of artists

In 1967, Konrad Fischer and his wife Dorothee started a company that he unpretentiously and at the same time very self-confidently called "Ausstellungen bei Konrad Fischer", or "Konrad Fischer Exhibitions". The first artist he showcased was Carl Andre, a young sculptor from New York who arrived with sketches to create the work on site. This work was presented in a courtyard passage in the old town of Düsseldorf between the Kunsthalle and the Kunstakademie. Glass doors sealed off the narrow passage at both ends – the sparse exhibition space measuring less than 15 square meters was complete. The work, consisting of a hundred equally sized rolled steel plates on the cement floor, was titled "5 x 20 Altstadt Rectangles". It was an instant hit and kick-started the success of the Fischer gallery.

«I want to breathe fresh life into Germany's fusty, provincial cultural scene.»

Konrad Fischer (1939–1996)

This sensational premiere was followed by numerous other European debuts by pioneering minimalist and conceptual artists such as Richard Long, Sol LeWitt and Bruce Nauman. The international network of artists, curators and collectors grew rapidly. Through his courage, his undeniable charisma, and even a likable arrogance philosophically grounded in deep artistic expertise, Fischer soon succeeded in drawing the attention of the international art scene to the Rhineland. Artists such as Richard Long, Jan Dibbets, Robert Ryman, Mario Merz, Hanne Darboven, Charlotte Posenenske and Gilbert & George exhibited at Konrad Fischer's gallery.

Berlin, overseas – and Bern

Konrad Fischer's great advantage was his very personal way of dealing with emerging artists, especially those who had ventured across the Atlantic. They were his family. Coffee and cake with Fischer was a regular event within the Düsseldorf artists' community, a hallmark of the gallery, so to speak. Everybody came, and sometimes something came out of it. For example, a lifelong friendship.

Establishing a Berlin branch seemed inevitable in the mid-noughties. Artists found affordable studios in the city, and collectors from all over the world stopped by out of curiosity. "In Daniel Marzona, who sadly passed away much too early in 2024, we had found the ideal director for the Berlin branch," says Thomas W. Rieger, Senior Director of the Konrad Fischer Galerie since 2007.

"The program was largely identical in Düsseldorf and Berlin," he says. Alongside established names, the lineup was joined – permanently or temporarily – by Edith Dekyndt, Alice Channer, Melissa Kretschmer, Susan Philipsz and Peter Buggenhout: "The fact that the Berlin scene has cooled down slightly since the gallery's early years doesn't bother us that much. With projects in New York and Los Angeles and participation in international art fairs, there are many other extremely interesting playgrounds opening up," says Rieger.

In 1969, the exhibition "Live in Your Head – When Attitudes Become Form", conceived by Harald Szeemann and co-curated by Konrad Fischer, made a huge splash at Kunsthalle Bern. This was not a respectable exhibition, but a collection of works that were difficult to classify: conceptual art, Arte Povera, Fluxus and the like. Outrage – local farmers dumped a load of manure in front of the museum's doors – and jubilation – finally, the breakthrough that promised new directions – earned the exhibition its reputation as a milestone in the art world.

This played into the hands of gallery owner Konrad Fischer and his team. He was one of the key figures dealing in minimal art and conceptual art and he and his artists enjoyed one success after another. His word soon carried weight among the Documenta leadership as well. When Konrad Fischer died far too young in 1996 at the age of 57, his wife Dorothee continued to run the gallery they had managed together in his spirit. One year after Dorothee Fischer's death, large parts of the collection and the extensive archive were transferred to the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen. Dorothee Fischer once described the collection as the "panorama of her life".

In their daughter's capable hands

Throughout his life, Konrad Fischer was a radical thinker who made rapid decisions. One of these was probably the co-founding of the Sperone Westwater Fischer Gallery in New York in 1975. He left the gallery, however, in 1982. Today, the Konrad Fischer Galerie stages pop-up exhibitions in New York, such as the beautiful performance curated by Bruce Nauman, now 84 years old, featuring his latest video works that show him making drawings with his eyes closed (until June 20). The results of this self-experiment, which are also on display, are surprising in their rigor and are evidence of a tireless creative spirit with a masterful thirst for discovery.

Berta Fischer, the daughter of Konrad and Dorothee, assisted the artist during the installation of the works in the temporary premises in Tribeca in May. She is an artist herself and lives in Berlin, where she enjoys a flourishing career. She took over the management of the gallery after the death of her mother in 2015. Unlike her father, the daughter, who is now a mother of two, never gave up art, but continuing the gallery's work was nonetheless imperative for her: "When my mother died, it was only natural for me to continue running the gallery. It was important to me to preserve this unique story of my parents and this gallery." This was also because of the close-knit bond between the artists.

Berta Fischer has now been working with the directors Thomas W. Rieger (Düsseldorf) and Beate Pasko (Berlin) for decades. With them, she addresses global challenges, transformation processes and the classification of transition phenomena with a sober, unerring eye. This applies both to her artistic work and to the work of the gallery. A somewhat vulnerable business that requires – as her parents demonstrated – both resilience and sensitivity. With a clear mind at all times, preferably with an unbeatable coolness.

Independent Collectors by NZZ Art: private collections that are well worth a visit

The **Independent Collectors** network – part of the NZZ since late 2023 – acts as a global hub for private collectors of contemporary art and art enthusiasts by opening up networking opportunities far beyond their own circle, enabling the discovery of new artistic perspectives and making the often opaque process of collecting more accessible and transparent.

In an era marked by the increasing globalization and digitalization of the art market, the advantages of this network are manifold: it serves as a forum for discussing motivations, challenges and the refinement of collection strategies, while at the same time sharpening members' awareness of new developments. The private pursuit of collecting is transformed into an active contribution to the broader cultural discourse, creating space for dialog. The selection of collections featured in this supplement illustrates the diversity and passion behind this commitment to art. All of the **private collections** presented here are open to the public and well worth a visit.

As one of the most ambitious private collections of international contemporary art, the **Duerckheim Collection** (page 18) focuses on key works of German and Austrian post-war art as well as young British artists. Part of the collection is currently on display in the conceptual exhibition "Vexation of Spirit" at the Serralves Museum in Porto. The collection by **Andrew Jovic** (page 23), whose roots lie in urban art, focuses on ultra-contemporary items and includes works by artists whose practices are still evolving. In the **Kienbaum Collection** (page 22), art is consciously integrated into the everyday work of the consulting firm. The **White Rabbit Collection** (page 21) features exclusively Chinese art of the 21st century. Founder Judith Neilson has made the collection freely available, particularly to a non-Chinese public.

But there are clear differences between the collections in terms of both content and presentation: while the **Klocker Museum** (page 22), which opened in 2022 and showcases Austrian painting and sculpture from 1945 onward, pursues a clear institutional mission – such as actively balancing the historical under-representation of women in the collection – the private art space **MErode** (page 21) in Belgium focuses on intuition. Here, contemporary art is presented in an immersive and deliberately non-contextualized way.

We hope you enjoy your dive!

Laura D'Incau, Lead NZZ Art

Jake and Dinos Chapman, «The End of Fun», 2010, © 2026 Pro Litteris.
FILIPE BRAGA/PROVIDED BY FUNDAÇÃO DE SERRALVES, PORTO

Rémy Zaugg, «Look, I am Blind, Look – Red I», 1999, © 2026 Pro Litteris.
FILIPE BRAGA/PROVIDED BY FUNDAÇÃO DE SERRALVES, PORTO

When reality catches up with reflection

The private Duerckheim Collection has found a temporary home in the Serralves Museum of Contemporary Art in Porto. The current exhibition «Vexation of Spirit» focuses on three key forces: religion, society and war.

Christian Duerckheim, born in 1944 in Bautzen, Saxony, is one of those collectors who quickly transformed their passion into a consistent approach that they have pursued for decades. As early as the 1960s, he began to engage with art and acquire works – tentatively at first, but soon with increasing clarity. His encounter with Georg Baselitz's "Gigant" print was a formative starting point. It focused his attention on contemporary art and laid the foundation for a collection that would henceforth concentrate on developments since the 1970s.

From this early decision, a collection of remarkable rigor has emerged over the last few decades. Duerckheim did not collect eclectically, but rather with a keen sense for artistic works that reflect social and historical upheaval. Today, his collection is considered one of the most ambitious private collections of international contemporary art. At its center are key works of German and Austrian post-war art, including pieces by Anselm Kiefer, Hermann Nitsch, Blinky Palermo and Rémy Zaugg. They document a period of artistic renewal in which questions of identity, memory and history were being explored with new urgency.

At the same time, the collection is distinguished by its international focus: British and global items are equally represented, broadening the scope of the collection considerably. Works by Jake and Dinos Chapman, Theaster Gates, Gilbert and George, Antony Gormley, Damien Hirst and Tracey Emin are examples of an art that engages with the conditions of the present – often provocative, sometimes radical, but always with analytical precision.

Making artworks accessible

Christian Duerckheim never viewed his collection as a purely private undertaking. In 2013 and again in 2022, he donated significant pieces, especially works on paper, to the British Museum in London. These donations underscore his commitment not only to preserving the works, but also to putting them in an institutional context and to making them accessible to an international audience.

The partnership with Fundação de Serralves in Porto, a coastal town in north-western Portugal, marks another crucial milestone. For the past two years, the Serralves Museum of Contemporary Art has housed a selection of 37 works by 19 artists on long-term loan. This collaboration is further enriched by the donation of Kiefer's monumental work "Dat rosa miel apibus" (2010–2011), which programmatically epitomizes the collection's guiding themes. For Duerckheim, Serralves is an institution whose critical and forward-looking perspective makes it predestined to embed these works within a lively discourse.

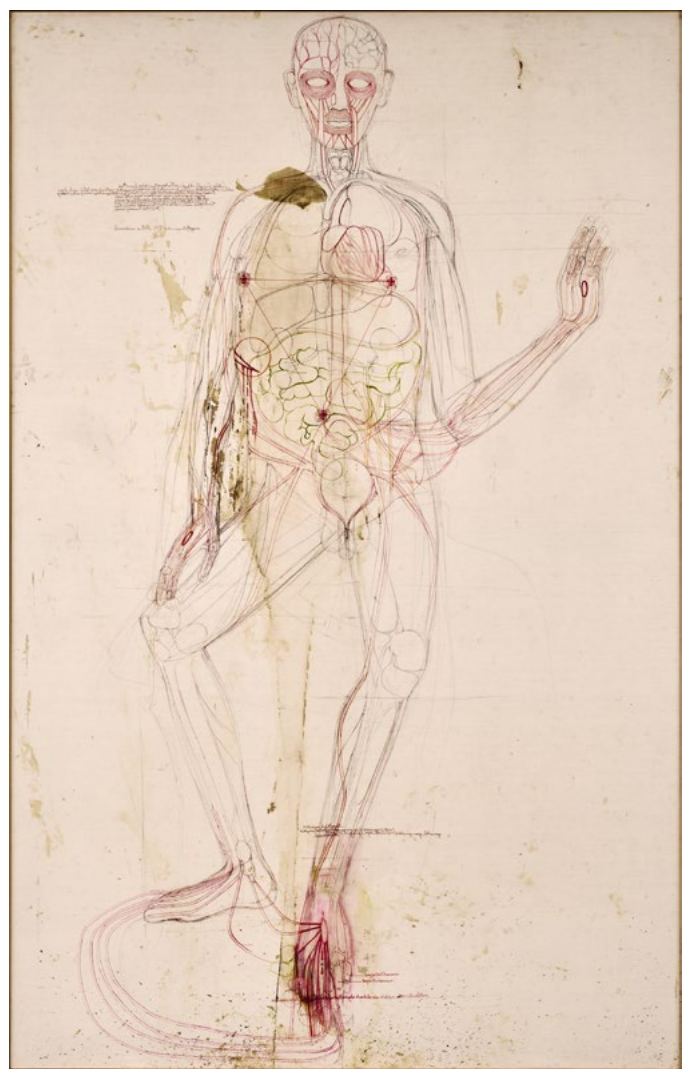
Christian Duerckheim's collection is considered one of the most ambitious private collections of international contemporary art.

The resulting exhibition "Vexation of Spirit. The Duerckheim Collection x Serralves", which runs until November 1, 2026, and can thus be seen throughout the entire summer season, is the highlight of this collaboration so far. It is far more than a traditional presentation of a collection. Rather, it unfolds as a conceptual experiment focusing on three central forces that have shaped human history: religion, society and war.

Resonances and friction

Within this field of tension, the works enter into dialog with each other. They create resonances, but also deliberate friction. Time and again, it becomes apparent how religious narratives, social orders and political claims to power intertwine and how they can be exploited. The exhibition also highlights the formative role of the Judeo-Christian tradition in the Western world, whose symbolism and nar-

Georg Baselitz, «Kreuz», 1964, © 2026 Georg Baselitz. FILIPE BRAGA/PROVIDED BY FUNDAÇÃO DE SERRALVES, PORTO



Hermann Nitsch, «Oedipus Christus», 1981, © 2026 Pro Litteris. PEDRINI PHOTOGRAPHY ZURICH/PROVIDED BY FUNDAÇÃO DE SERRALVES, PORTO

ratives have been used for centuries to legitimize various forms of rule.

What makes the show particularly compelling is its topicality. When the first conceptual considerations about the collection arose in the 1990s, many of the conflicts that are so virulent today still seemed distant. Three decades later, the world appears in many ways more fragmented, more unstable and rife with new tensions. Against this backdrop, "Vexation of Spirit. The Duerckheim Collection x Serralves" takes on an unexpected urgency: the works not only reflect historical developments, but can also be read as precise commentaries on the present.

Christian Duerckheim consciously sees the exhibition as an open space for thought. It is intended both to facilitate an aesthetic experience and to stimulate reflection on the mechanisms of power, the role of faith and ideology, and the fragility of social orders. Visitors are invited to engage with these complex relationships, to develop their own interpretations and to remain open to contradictions. This is precisely where the strength of this exhibition lies: it does not offer simple answers – it emphasizes the complexity of the questions.

Damien Hirst, «How did we lose our way?» (Triptych), 2009, © 2026 Pro Litteris. FILIPE BRAGA/PROVIDED BY FUNDAÇÃO DE SERRALVES, PORTO

International context against a historical backdrop

The Klocker Museum in Hall in Tirol houses a collection of over 1,200 works of modern and contemporary art – always in dialog with the art scene.

The Klocker Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, which opened in 2022, is located in the Austrian town of Hall in Tirol, nestled in a medieval setting. It showcases works from the collection as well as contemporary pieces in an international context. The collection, which now comprises more than 1,200 artworks, is growing steadily through acquisitions and donations.

The beginnings of the Klocker Foundation's art collection date back to Wolfgang Klocker (1945–1974), the son of Emmy Klocker (1915–2006) and Tyrolean entrepreneur Hans Klocker (1909–1981). As early as the mid-1960s, he established close ties with Tyrolean artists such as Max Weiler, Paul Flora and numerous up-and-coming artists of his time. While his father successfully managed the car dealership VOWA in Innsbruck, Wolfgang Klocker took over the management of the Audi NSU dealership and, from 1972 onward, transformed it into an exhibition space in which he presented works by contemporary Tyrolean artists alongside the latest cars.

Foundation for the promotion of art

His second great passion was aviation, which cost him his life in 1974 at the age of just 29. Emmy Klocker kept her son's passion for collecting alive and concentrated above all on Austrian painting and sculpture from 1945 onward, without committing herself to a specific stylistic direction.

In 1998, Emmy Klocker established the Komm. Rat. Dr. Hans Klocker and Dr. Wolfgang Klocker Foundation with the aim of preserving the memory of her son and husband by promoting art and establishing a museum. Every two years since 2014, the foundation has awarded a major art prize – alternating with a sponsorship prize – to living artists who have had a significant impact on Austrian art. The award is one of the most highly endowed art prizes in Austria and is accompanied by an exhibition and an acquisition. Previous winners include Lois Weinberger (2014), Martha Jungwirth (2016), Gottfried Bechtold (2018), Ernst Caramelle (2022), Christine Ljubanovic (2023), Jakob Lena Knebl and Ashley Hans Scheirl (2025).

By presenting a wide range of artistic voices and perspectives, the museum promotes dialog with the contemporary art scene and at the same time pays tribute to the collection's historical context. In the past, women were under-represented in the collection, which was not untypical for the period in question. But the foundation is gradually addressing this imbalance. For example, the first presentation of the museum's collection exclusively featured works by female artists, including Martha Jungwirth, Brigitte Kowanz, Eva Schlegel and Esther Stocker. In recent years, more and more queer-feminist pieces have been presented in temporary exhibitions.

Further focus on new talent

During the COVID-19 pandemic, works by a total of 28 Tyrolean artists were purchased to provide financial support during this difficult period; in 2022, they were displayed in the exhibition "Im März 2020…" ("In March 2020…"). In addition, the Klocker Foundation specifically supports young artists as well as recent graduates of academies and art schools. To this end, the museum has set up its own exhibition space: the Art Box. The selected artists receive a grant of EUR 1,000, a fixed production budget and the opportunity to develop their own exhibition concept and present it for six months. In 2025, a studio for artists to use was also added to the foundation's headquarters. At the same time, the sculpture park was expanded to include additional platforms for temporary displays.

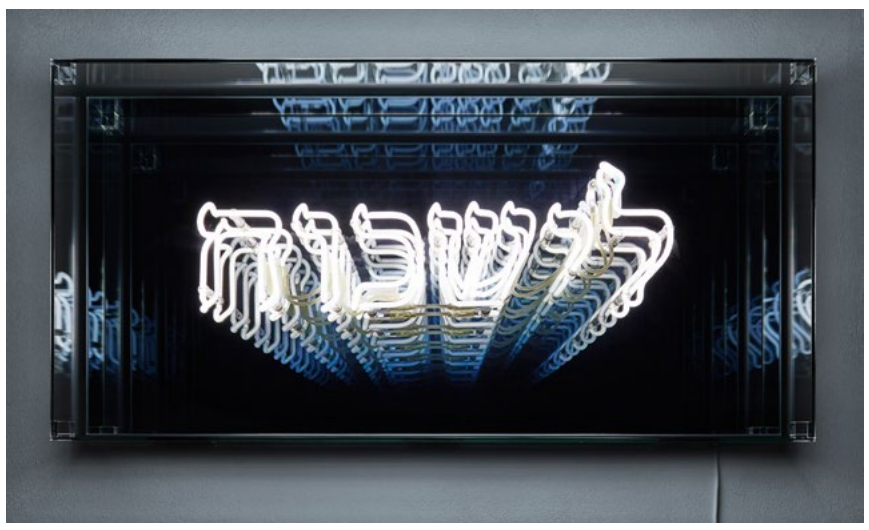
Since the opening of the Klocker Museum, the foundation has focused its new acquisitions on the works of the prizewinners. This collection policy is complemented by selected acquisitions from regionally based artists as well as international artists whose work has thematic and contextual ties to the region of Tyrol.

Martha Jungwirth, from the series «Judith und Holofernes Nr. 25», 2015, © 2026 Pro Litteris. JOHANNES PLATTNER

View of an exhibition in the Klocker Museum: «Jakob Lena Knebl and Ashley Hans Scheirl – Sag' mir wo die Blumen sind», 2025, © 2026 Pro Litteris. WEST.FOTOSTUDIO

Micha Wille, «loser ghost – the worst kind of loser», 2019, © 2026 Pro Litteris. CATHARINA BOND

In the past, women were under-represented in the collection. But the foundation is gradually addressing this imbalance.



Brigitte Kowanz, «Vergessen», 2009, © 2026 Pro Litteris. JOHANNES PLATTNER

Emmy Klocker in Bilbao, 1998, © Klocker Foundation. KLOCKER FOUNDATION

Intuitive, immersive, open – the MErode concept

MErode is an art space in the heart of Ronse in Belgium, founded by collector Patric Tuytens. Originally conceived as a private collection, it has gradually been made available to the public in response to numerous requests from the collector's friends and acquaintances.

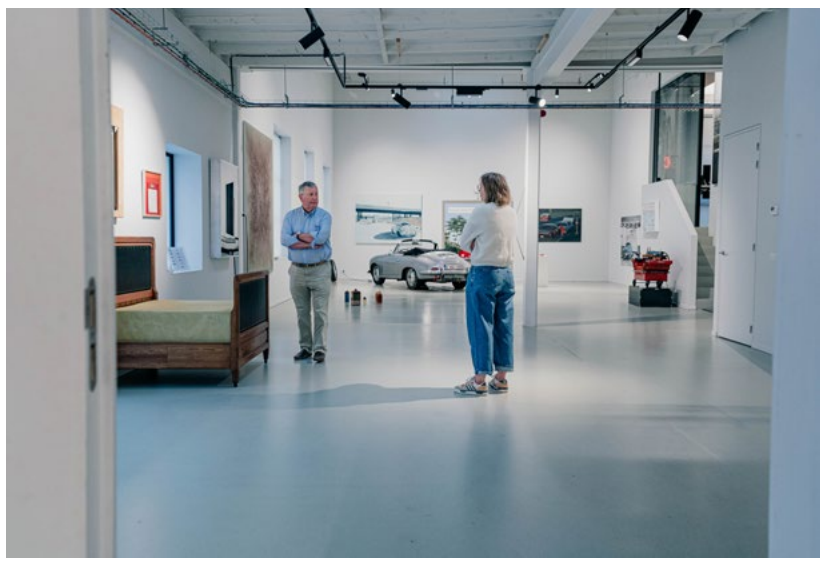
MErode goes beyond the understanding of a traditional collection: it is an immersive place where contemporary art and personal vision enter into a direct dialog. Spanning over 2,000 square meters, a multi-layered spatial setting unfolds with permanent installations, large-scale works and pieces across a wide variety of media. An environment that invites people not only to look at art, but to experience it directly.

Thus, the selection of the works does not follow a market-driven rationale; it arises from intuition and a personal connection to the artists. Belgian pieces are presented naturally alongside international voices. What matters is not so much the art-historical canon but the immediate effect: works that unsettle you, move you, make you smile or open up new perspectives. Over the years, this has led to the emergence of a multi-layered arrangement that continues to evolve and remains deliberately open.

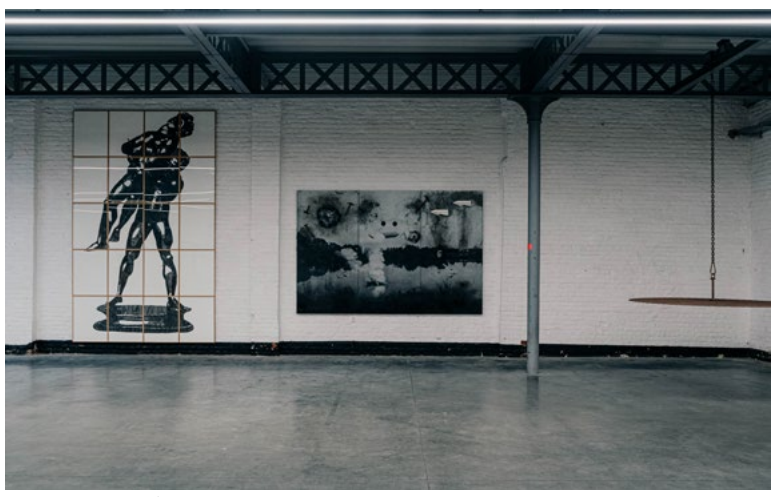
MErode sees itself as a place of encounters. In addition to regular exhibitions, the space also offers the setting for events of all kinds, from private gatherings and cultural events to discussion formats. Art is not presented in isolation, but is embedded in social and communicative contexts.

These insights are revealed during private tours led by Patric Tuytens and his daughter Marie Tuytens. The result is a rare insight into collecting as a living process characterized by decisions, coincidences and relationships. What is striking is that the works on site are deliberately not described in detail or contextualized. This restraint is programmatic and creates space for visitors' own perceptions and interpretations.

The atmosphere of the place unmistakably reflects the personality of its founder: a mixture of curiosity, openness and subtle, often tongue-in-cheek humor. This attitude is what gives MErode its unique character. It is not a static archive, but a dynamic space for experience in which art, people and conversations constantly form new constellations and each visit can become an independent discovery.



From left to right: Bradley Kronz, «Untitled (bed)», 2022, Charlie De Voet, «Hush now painting», 2020, Benoit Platéus, «Fuji Hunt & Fuji Hunt Developer», 2018, Hilde Goossens, «#758 On my way to Hasselt», 2000, Karin Hanssen, «Call Box», 2016–2017, Karl Philips, «Jef Colruyt's waterfall», 2021–2022, © 2026 Pro Litteris. KIM LANGIE



From left to right: Damien De Lepeleire, «Hercule et Anté», 2009, Joost Pauwaert, «A new study for an end of the world» 2022, Joost Pauwaert, «Circular Saw», 2021, © 2026 Pro Litteris. KIM LANGIE

From left to right: Gianin Conrad, «Skulpturencosmos» (a section of the circular scene), 2019, Roeland Tweelinckx, «Beam and Chair», 2018, © 2026 Pro Litteris. VALERIE CLARYSSE

Works that unsettle you, move you, make you smile or open up new perspectives.

White Rabbit: Chinese art of the 21st century

When Judith Neilson traveled to Beijing for the first time in the late 1990s, she encountered an art scene that would have a lasting impact on her. She was deeply impressed by the creative energy, the joy of experimentation and the technical precision shown by many young Chinese artists. Driven by this fascination, she began to build a collection dedicated exclusively to Chinese art of the 21st century – at a time when it was hardly noticed outside Asia.

Today, the White Rabbit Collection comprises more than 3,000 works by over 800 artists – it is considered one of the most important collections of contemporary Chinese art in the world. Regular trips to China and Taiwan remain the foundation of the collection to this day and drive its continuous expansion.

Australian collector Judith Neilson had a clear intention from the outset: she wanted to share her acquisitions with as many people as possible, especially non-Chinese people who had never visited a museum or gallery before. Based on this conviction, she finally established the White Rabbit Gallery in Sydney in 2009.

It is housed in a former Rolls-Royce service building from the 1940s, which architect William Smart transformed into a clean, modern exhibition space. To this day, the industrial architecture of the building forms a striking contrast to the often poetic, political or experimental works of the collection.

Because only a portion of the collection can be shown at any one time, the gallery organizes two large exhibitions every year featuring entirely new displays. The gallery is closed during the setup periods in May and November. This rhythm makes it possible to continually reveal new facets of the collection and to place different works in dialog with each other.

The White Rabbit Gallery is entirely non-profit and is financed exclusively by philanthropist Judith Neilson. Admission is free.

Hu Yinping, «Wheat, Wheat», 2024.
PHOTOS: HAMISH MCINTOSH/PROVIDED BY ARTIST AND WHITE RABBIT COLLECTION

Samson Young, «Stanley», 2014.

Huang Yongping, «Les Consoles de Jeu Souveraines», 2017.

The White Rabbit Gallery in Sydney strives to make Chinese contemporary art accessible to everyone.

Business and a change of perspective: where art meets the workplace

German entrepreneur Jochen Kienbaum has built up an impressive collection of contemporary art, which now comprises around 1,000 works spread over eight locations in Germany and Austria.

New employees are given a laptop, are introduced to the main business areas and departments, meet their first few colleagues – and then it's time for an art tour with the curator. This is what onboarding looks like at Kienbaum Consultants International. And at the end of the tour, the same question almost always arises: why is the yellow raincoat classed as art?

The «Regenhaut» riddle

Anyone walking through the spacious entrance hall of the consultancy firm's Cologne headquarters encounters colorful, abstract paintings and sculptures. But it is Julia Gruner's work "Regenhaut" (2017) that piques most people's interest. Slightly elevated, out of reach of curious fingers, it hangs in a clearly visible spot above a large open staircase, with its unexpected colorfulness standing out in a business context. It is precisely this work that makes it easy to understand what motivated Jochen Kienbaum to link his collection so closely with the company. For him, art means looking beyond one's own horizons, changing perspectives and questioning one's own actions, with a certain sense of humor.

Art in the office is an invitation to employees to remain curious and to find inspiration outside the professional sphere.

This is exactly what artist Julia Gruner does. In her works, she explores the basic material of painting – color – in experimental, often playful and ironic approaches. In doing so, she takes up art-historical concepts of aesthetics, categorization and the separation of art and everyday life, and at the same time calls them into question. In her early works, she used acrylic paint as a sculptural material: she isolates, transforms and pushes it to its limit. The work "Regenhaut" therefore consists exclusively of acrylic paint, which – detached from the canvas – takes on an independent, three-dimensional form.

By drawing on the shape of an iconic yellow raincoat, Julia Gruner deliberately undermines traditional notions of painting and at the same time highlights the surprising closeness between an art object and an everyday object. The same invitation is extended to employees: it's not about understanding art "correctly" or liking it immediately. Rather, it's an offer to remain curious, to find inspiration outside the professional sphere and to engage in the unexpected.

Works at eight locations

Since the 1970s, German entrepreneur Jochen Kienbaum has built up an impressive collection of contemporary art. Today, it comprises around 1,000 works, including paintings, sculptures, objects and works on paper. It brings together European and American artists with a focus on color and abstraction, beginning with works from the late 1960s. Like the consulting firm, the art collection has now been handed down to the next generation, who are continuing to uphold the connection between art and business in their father's spirit.

What makes the collection special is its location: it is not found in a museum, but is part of the everyday working environment of Kienbaum Consultants International. At eight locations in major German and Austrian cities, it shapes the offices and lends them a distinctive atmosphere. In their daily work, employees and visitors encounter pieces by artists such as Antonio Calderara, Günther Förg, Bernard Frize, Julia Gruner, Imi Knoebel, Jonathan Lasker, Fabián Marcaccio, Richard Allan Morris, Carl Ostendarp, David Reed, Jorinde Voigt and Birgit Werres.

For many, it offers a casual and natural encounter with contemporary art, and employees are regularly invited to webinars and tours, which make it even more accessible. Exhibitions at the Cologne headquarters are open to the public during working hours with artist talks or introductory presentations.

In addition, the collection reaches a wider audience through loans to museums and institutions. A special focus on artist publications has led to the Kienbaum Artists' Books Edition, which also serves as a gift for clients and partners and further strengthens the dialog between art and the corporate world.

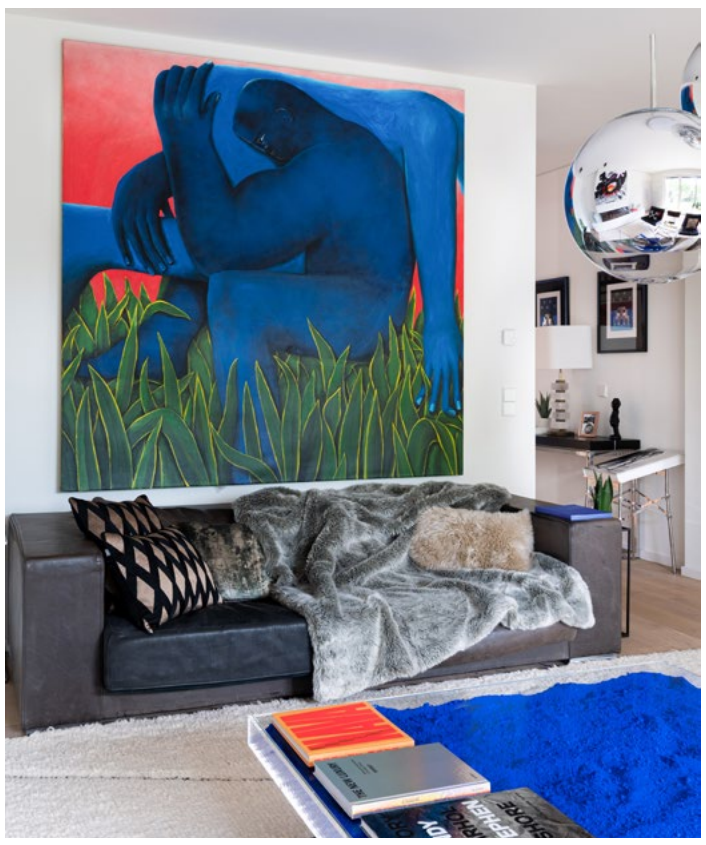
Thom Merrick, «Fin de Cycle», 1993, © 2026 Pro Litteris.

PHOTOS: © KIENBAUM COLLECTION COLOGNE/BOZICA BABIC

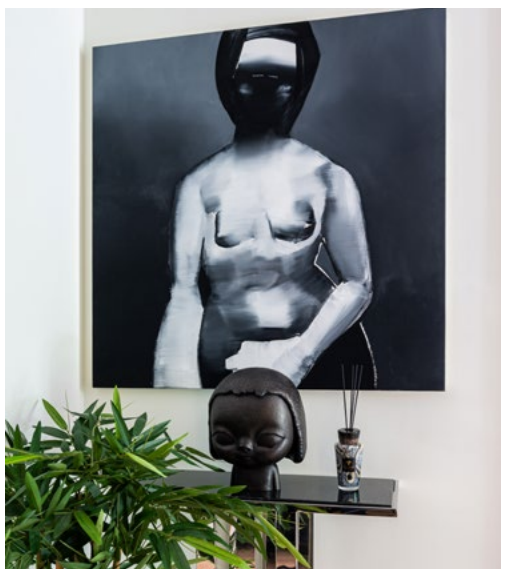
Julia Gruner, «Regenhaut», 2017, © 2026 Pro Litteris.

David Reed, «#470», 2001, and «#691», 2017–2018, Birgit Werres, «o.T.#42/21», 2021, Dan Falvin, «Colour Round», 1992, © 2026 Pro Litteris.

Imi Knoebel, «Lady 4», 1998, © 2026 Pro Litteris.



View of an exhibition with works by Vojtech Kovarik, «Aftermath», 2020, Invader, «Space One (Gold)», 2013, and Invader, «Space One (Silver)», 2013, © 2026 Pro Litteris.



View of an exhibition with Tomoo Gokita, «Strong Woman», 2015, and Roby Dwi Antono, «Kira (Black)», 2021, © 2026 Pro Litteris.

Andrew Jovic with his wife Julia in front of Banksy's limited-edition work «Laugh Now», 2003, © 2026 Pro Litteris.

PHOTOS: © ANDREW JOVIC COLLECTION/CHRISTOPHE FRANÇOIS NILLES

«Understanding not just the work, but the person behind it»

How it all began: art collector Andrew Jovic on his collection, urban art and new visual languages.

Andrew Jovic, known on Instagram as Cyberkid70, is a passionate art collector with Croatian roots who lives in Düsseldorf with his wife Julia. Jovic collects art with a keen eye for emerging trends and new visual languages. The starting point was urban art, which continues to shape his view to this day. His collection now encompasses a broader field of ultra-contemporary pieces with a focus on artists whose practice is still evolving. In this interview, he talks about his beginnings, his selection criteria and why he is particularly interested in the moments when something new is just beginning to take shape.

Mr. Jovic, how did you get into collecting?
I got into collecting through urban art, which still shapes my view of art to this day. Starting from Düsseldorf, the collection has gradually opened up into a broader field of ultra-contemporary practices, yet remains committed to works that appear in a moment before they are fully classified, stabilized, or co-opted by institutions.

Which artists shaped the beginnings of your collection?
My collection began with Banksy and Invader; later I encountered a similar urgency in younger contemporary artists like Robert Nava. This phase was formative. It sharpened my attention to early moments and taught me to trust a visual instinct before a general consensus emerges. Collecting as a mere form of validation has never interested me. What counts for me is the moment when an artistic perspective is not yet recognizable to everyone.

«I'm drawn to works that carry tension, ambivalence and friction.»

What criteria do you use to select artists or their works?
I am particularly interested in younger artists and practices that are still evolving. Often these relationships do not arise through galleries or art fairs, but through direct encounters: studio visits, discussions, recommendations or a chance encounter with an artwork at the right moment. This kind of closeness is important to me because it fundamentally changes the understanding of artistic practice. The focus shifts from the individual object toward process, development and intention. It has always been just as important to me to understand not just the work, but the person behind it.

How has your collection changed over the years?
Over time, the collection has developed into a dialog between the visual language of urban art and a younger generation of artists working in painting, installation and related media. I am interested in pieces that reflect on how images function today – socially, digitally and psychologically – without becoming illustrative. I am less interested in elaborate answers than in works that carry tension, ambivalence and friction.

Are there any current artists that you are particularly interested in?
One current example is Juliana Paek, whose work I got to know during her studies at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf. I recently purchased several of her works, at a time when her practice is still clearly evolving. I was immediately struck by the fact that her works do not present themselves as complete. They move between painting and installation, exploring questions of memory, identity and social structure in a concentrated way. For me, encounters like this are crucial because they enable us to follow an artistic practice and the person behind it at an early stage in their search for a voice.

What do you believe makes a good collection?
I see collections not as static entities, but as a dynamic whole. They are constantly changing, and ideally the works also enter into new relationships with each other. A collection should not only reflect taste, but also forge connections, create contradictions and open up new interpretations.

What role does the digital space play in your collection?
The digital space is also part of this reality. For my generation, platforms like Instagram are not outside the art world, but a place where attention is generated, artists are discovered and conversation begins. I use this space not only to present works, but also to promote artists and to connect people.

Finally, what does collecting mean to you today?
Ultimately, to me, collecting is a way of staying close to the changes in visual language. It's less about the possession of works and more about having a sense of when something new is beginning to take shape.

CY TWOMBLY

Muses, 1963, oil, wax crayon, pencil and color pencil on canvas, 70 x 60 cm

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