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Ceci N'Est Pas Un Art Fair: Independent Brussels Shakes Up Gallery Scene

By JULIA-AMBRA VERLAINE



Awol Erizku, the photographer behind Beyoncé's pregnancy announcement, is on display at the Independent Brussels art fair in Brussels. *PHOTO: STEMS GALLERY*

An unlikely panel in Brussels finds International Monetary Fund chief [Christine Lagarde](#) next to disgraced junk-bond king Michael Milken – and not far from Dick Fuld, the last boss of Lehman Brothers before it went bankrupt.

Welcome to the contemporary art installation dubbed “Voodoo Justice for People of Finance” at [Independent Brussels](#), the upstart art fair that has collectors from across the world flying in to Europe's capital this weekend.

Representing galleries from 15 countries and 32 cities, the fair has gained notoriety among top collectors and is rapidly taking on larger, established counterparts such as Art Brussels, which is celebrating its 35th anniversary.

If you're expecting Frieze or Art Basel, Independent Brussels will surprise you. The European edition of the New York fair co-founded by gallerist Elizabeth Dee is in its second year, and touts a different philosophy: quality over quantity.

Home to surrealist painter René Magritte, Belgium has a history of welcoming rebels, and nurturing what is out of the ordinary. Independent Brussels is indeed a rebel in its field: Galleries can only participate by private invitation, in contrast to other fairs where applications are open. In the world of contemporary art, where the collector or viewer can be overwhelmed, Ms. Dee's approach produces a curated selection of newcomers alongside established galleries.

To give you an idea, Independent Brussels features just 72 art houses – from Lisbon to New York, Berlin, Paris and other cultural hubs. Art Brussels is hosting nearly double that, and London's Frieze, one of the world's largest contemporary art fairs, will feature more than 160 galleries in October.

<https://blogs.wsj.com/brussels/2017/04/21/ceci-nest-pas-un-art-fair-independent-brussels-shakes-up-gallery-scene/>

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“It started out not intending to be an art fair exactly, but as a consensus of galleries collaborating on a new type of collective exhibition – in reaction to the limitations they struggled with at traditional art fairs,” said Alix Dana and Olivier Pesret, co-directors of the show in Brussels and New York.

Independent Brussels sheds many characteristics of traditional art fairs: there are no aisles, nor booth numbers. It’s not in a warehouse or temporary structure. Instead, the art sprawls throughout a former 1930s department store not far from the city’s medieval square. And while most fairs print off expensive invites for attending VIPs, Independent Brussels is entirely digital, part of its ecofriendly mantra.



Gallerist David Zwirner is participating for the second year at Independent Brussels art fair. *PHOTO: INDEPENDENT BRUSSELS*

Young galleries such as Brussels-based [Stems](#), founded in 2015 by siblings Pascaline and Guillaume Smets, are displaying works by 28-year old American artist Awol Erizku – the photographer behind Beyoncé’s [pregnancy announcement](#).

Another participant is Sao Paulo’s [Mendes Wood DM](#), known for their eclectic parties and knack for spotting young talent. The gallery just set up shop in Brussels, saying it seeks to “foster a cross cultural dialogue between Brazilian and international artists.”

For a manageable contemporary art experience, and a rooftop view of Brussels this weekend, check out Independent Brussels. Opening hours are 12:00pm – 7:00pm, Admission is free.

Where:

Vanderborcht Building, 50 Rue de l’Ecuyer, 1000 Brussels. Metro: De Brouckere or Central Station.