

artcentral Collectors make their annual pilgrimage to this Swiss city for a week that is part social whirl, part feeding frenzy
By Marc Spiegler Photographs by Jessica Craig-Martin

FOR 51 WEEKS A YEAR, Basel is a picturesque, placid Rhineland city. But for one week in June, Art Basel comes to town and transforms it into the white-hot epicenter of the contemporary art market. Billionaire collectors have been known to pose as workmen in an attempt to poach works during the fair's installation. Jet-setters jostle for drinks at the Kunsthalle bar. Art consultants squire clients from booth to booth on epic shopping sprees. Vying for dinner invitations at Donati's veers toward the vicious.

Taking place this year from June 18 through 23 (with a vernissage on the 17th) at the Messe Basel, the fair marks the second leg of an art world marathon that will have started the week before—at the Venice Biennale's three-day opening events, June 12 through 14. But since nothing is officially on sale in Venice, collectors come to Switzerland with an acquisitive thirst to quench—every Venice Biennale produces new stars, and the galleries lucky enough to represent them will cash in the following week in Basel.

"I always go to Venice to see what's being done by younger artists," says Los Angeles collector Eli Broad. "And then I wander through Art Basel, letting gallerists know what I'm looking for at the time." Broad first purchased works by sculptor Stephan Balkenhol and painter Sue Williams at Basel. He began acquiring work by video artist Doug Aitken after seeing his piece *Thaw* two years ago in Art Unlimited, the section of the fair devoted to art that's too large or otherwise unfitting for dealer booths.

Indeed, Basel's position in the center of Europe means that for collectors from North and South America, the fair offers a chance to discover the Continent's hottest galleries and young artists. With so many flocking to Art Basel for the latest and best

It takes more than money to be a player at ART BASEL—the pursuit of art requires mental and physical stamina





in contemporary art, the competition for booths is stiff—930 galleries, including all but a handful from the 2002 fair, vied for the 270 slots. “I hate art fairs and I don’t go to any others,” says Alexander von Berswordt, owner of the M Bochum gallery in Bochum, Germany. “But Basel is different. Of the 100 best galleries in the world, 98 are there. Almost every major collector and all the museum directors come.”

Von Berswordt chose Art Unlimited to spotlight a new direction in sculptor Richard Serra’s work this year. Unlike the artist’s previous metal-plate installations, *Vertical Torus* is much higher than it is wide, stretching 17 feet into the air—and weighing 52 tons. Another huge Serra sculpture, *Siamese*, will devour nearly half of M Bochum’s 1,200-square-foot booth in the fair’s main hall.

In the current art market, “going big” seems to be a smart tactic. While the high end of the contemporary market has held strong, the middle has grown soft. “At the Armory Show in New York in February, we worked much harder than last year and still our turnover was a little smaller,” says Matthias Arndt of the Berlin gallery Arndt & Partner. “In the €5,000–18,000 [\$5,400–19,400] range, buyers are very hesitant. So our strategy is to aim high, because those collectors don’t stop buying for any reason.” As he did last year, Arndt will devote the center of his booth to a Thomas Hirschhorn maquette, in this case the 184-square-foot *Neighbors*, from 2002, priced at €100,000 (\$108,000).

dealers to meet the fair committee’s standard, and they usually get replaced by more contemporary galleries,” explains Art Basel director Samuel Keller. “It’s important to have galleries that are not just showing the same Richters, Warhols and Jeff Walls. Art Basel’s not supposed to be an auction house hit parade.” Thus the fair has cast its nets farther afield. In addition to the galleries from Asia and South America, there are many more exhibitors from the West Coast, including San Francisco photography dealer Jeffrey Fraenkel. And 2003 also marks the debut of Eastern European galleries, specifically from Poland and the Czech Republic.

Of course, it’s not just the range of galleries that has grown more global. “The contemporary market just continues to expand in terms of buyers,” says Glenn Scott Wright, director of the Victoria Miro Gallery in London. “All our solo shows have been sold out even before opening, with angry people calling us to ask why they couldn’t get a piece.” For longtime collectors, the change in the competitive environment can be bewildering. “I used to go around Europe buying art, and it would be a big deal,” powerhouse Chicago collector Lewis Manilow recalls. “But if I stopped buying tomorrow, it wouldn’t make a dent. There are so many more collectors now who are willing to spend \$50,000 to \$100,000 at a fair—and they’re looking for the same cutting-edge stuff as me. Every day a new player is born.”

But it takes more than money to be a player—the pursuit of artworks requires mental and physical stamina at Art Basel. Further taxing collectors’ energies, this year’s events kick off earlier than usual: On Sunday, June 15, comes an invitation-only reception at the long-awaited and recently opened Schaulager museum.

Established by the pharmaceuticals fortune of the Emanuel Hoffmann Foundation, the museum was designed by local celebrity architects Herzog & de Meuron on the outskirts of Basel.

The following night, Monday, June 16, brings the vernissages of Art Basel’s Art Unlimited section as well as the Liste fair—an event that is not officially associated with Art Basel but has been occurring in tandem since 1996. Held in a converted brewery full of idiosyncratic spaces, Liste is an excellent place to become acquainted with new galleries and artists. “I always buy quite a few pieces at the Basel fair, but you can also get some goodies at Liste,” says Danish furniture entrepreneur Ole Faarup. “Last year I discovered David Korty, an exciting young painter from California, at [the Los Angeles gallery] China Art Objects.” Manilow says he liked a dozen galleries at the Liste last year and bought a handful of pieces. One of the galleries, Modern Art in London, has been selected for the Art Statements section of Art Basel, which features solo shows for emerging artists. Graduating from the Liste to Art

Statements is a common trajectory for rising galleries, often followed by an invitation for a booth at Art Basel.

So the Schaulager, Liste and Unlimited lead up to the main event. The fair doors open at 11 a.m., and within moments, hundreds of thousands of dollars’ worth of art will be snapped up—whole booths have been known to sell out before noon. Making things somewhat less frenetic this time around, the fair mandated a 25 percent cut in the number of preview tickets issued to dealers and sponsors. “It had gotten overhyped,” explains fair director Keller. “I think we in the art world wanted to be popular with a broader public. But now we’re all starting to wonder if we’ve turned into too much of a social scene.”



In moments, hundreds of thousands of dollars will be spent

Gallerists tend to save such major pieces for the fair. Nicholas Logsdail of the Lisson Gallery in London is bringing an untitled, 15-foot-high bronze by Anish Kapoor, from 2002. Recently the market’s pendulum has been swinging away from the new and unknown toward established artists like Kapoor. “In 1999, the first year we came, it was all about what was upstairs,” says Steve Henry of the Paula Cooper Gallery in New York, referring to the more cutting-edge galleries on the fair hall’s second floor. “But that groundswell for the freshest, youngest work is retracting. I think collectors have started to realize that you can buy a Sol LeWitt for the same price as a Sarah Lucas.” This year the gallery is showing younger artists like Rudolf Stingel and Wayne Gonzales alongside its mainstays LeWitt, Carl Andre and Donald Judd.

But overall, earlier blue-chip works are losing ground at the fair. “As the material gets rarer, it’s harder for modern and postwar