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(1) Gabriela Gonzalez in Galerie Bromer (2) Gonzalez and fellow director Pier Stuker (3) Rämistrasse entrance (4) Max Bill art at Larkin Erdmann (5) Exhibition brochures (6) Erdmann himself (7) Works by Jannis Kounellis (8) Eva Presenhuber outside her gallery



GALLERIES/SWITZERLAND

# Culture clash

Although Basel has long laid claim to being Switzerland's art capital, Zürich has its eyes on the title too. And with a clutch of world-class galleries moving into the latter's city centre, it increasingly has the creative clout of a contender.

Photography *Lea Meienberg*

Until recently, gallerists seeking a new perch to show contemporary art in Zürich used to head towards the former factories of Zürich-West. Here, as in many European cities, the old industrial district attracted the most cutting-edge players. But since zealous property developers have moved into the area, the neighbourhood has lost some of its appeal. So those galleries that are keen to move on to the next, up-and-coming spot have taken something of a counterintuitive approach.

Rather than moving even further into the periphery, they have rediscovered the affluent city centre and put down roots on Rämistrasse. Climbing up from prim Bellevue, the street used to be lined with retailers but, faced with online competition, many shops have abandoned the bricks-and-mortar fight. That's why the

galleries have swept in; over the course of two years about a dozen have opened here. And as the landmark David Chipperfield-designed extension to the city's foremost art museum, the Kunsthaus, is due to open a stone's throw away in 2021, the move couldn't be more timely.

Due to its impressive museums and the world's biggest art fair, Basel has long ruled the roost on Switzerland's art scene. But Zürich has always been hot on its heels – the city's strength lies in its commercial galleries that operate in a mature market year-round. Plenty of collectors make time to stop off in the city when they head to Switzerland for Art Basel. The collections that will finally find room in the Kunsthaus's new building – spanning from French impressionism to fauvism, abstract expressionism



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“We want to be part of this incredible cultural heritage and allow intimate encounters with world-class works”

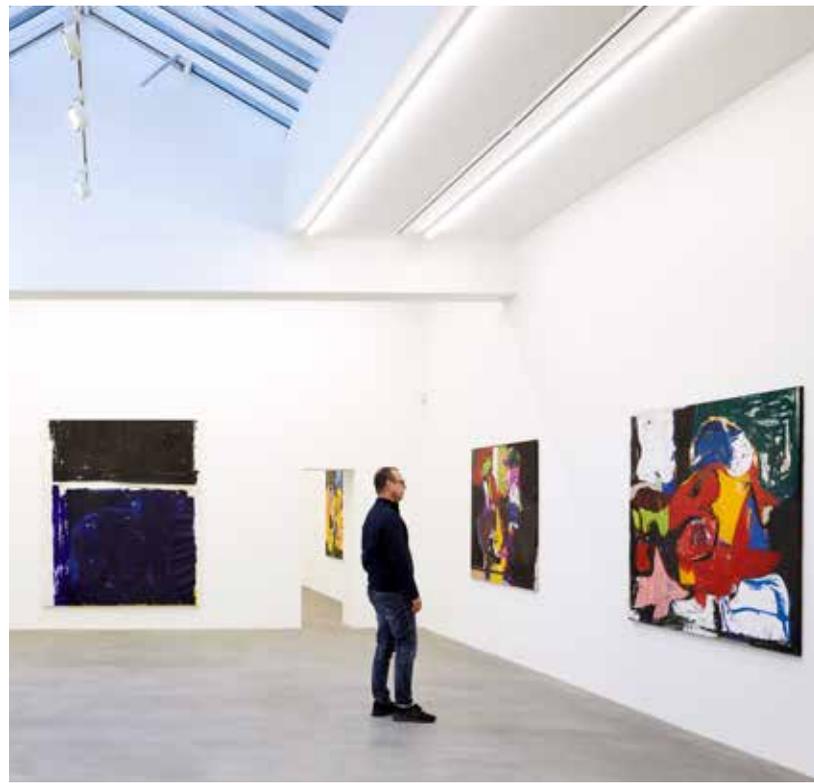


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to arte povera – will only entice them more. As will the site-specific light installation by Swiss artist Pipilotti Rist that will be set up on the square in front of the Kunsthaus. “You can already feel the positive vibes generated by the extension,” says art dealer Larkin Erdmann, who has opened a gallery only 100 metres away.

Not far from him, more colleagues have made the move from Zürich-West. Lange + Pult was followed by Maria Bernheim, Eva Presenhuber (who also has a space in New York), Galerie Bromer and global players Hauser & Wirth. Peter Kilchmann will join them in January. “It feels like a class reunion,” says Lange + Pult co-founder Stefano Pult of his new neighbours, all the while praising his surroundings. “Our collectors from Switzerland, Germany and France just find Rämistrasse a more attractive area. When they've visited the gallery we go for lunch at Kronenhalle, which is always an experience.”

The nearby restaurant, a Zürich institution where Chagalls and Matisse hang on the walls and *Geschmetzeltes* (sliced veal in cream sauce) graces the menu, is not the only landmark in the area. Just around the corner is the fabled Café Odéon, where cultural icons such as Jean Arp, James Joyce and Klaus Mann sipped coffee, some of them on the run from fascism and war. “We want to be part of this



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(1) Lounge at Hauser & Wirth (2) Joe Bradley artworks at Eva Presenhuber (3) Public exhibition at Hauser & Wirth (4) Maria Bernheim (5) James Koch, executive director at Hauser & Wirth



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incredible cultural heritage and allow intimate encounters with world-class works in our space,” says James Koch, executive director at Hauser & Wirth. The Swiss-born gallery has outposts around the world but the decision to stay close to home for this venture makes a lot of sense given the winds of change in the art market. Against the backdrop of cancelled art fairs and travel restrictions, Swiss-based collectors who usually fly and buy works far and wide are staying put. For gallerists this means refocusing their efforts too. “It’s back to the roots for us,” says gallerist Peter Kilchmann. “We aim to concentrate our activities in Zürich.”

Choosing this location will redraw not only the galleries’ approach to sales but is likely to affect programming and curation too. Rämistrasse’s 18th- and 19th-century townhouses have a salon-like air that’s completely different to the industrial-chic warehouses of Zürich-West. “I like the historical, smaller spaces for exhibitions with a more intimate format,” says Kilchmann. The city centre’s higher footfall will probably bring some surprise new visitors through the doors too. Maria Bernheim, one of the edgier gallerists on this burgeoning art strip, sees herself as “a new kid on the block”. This location will allow her to reach new audiences without making changes to her artist roster. Passers-by will probably stop and double-take when they walk past her windows showing artist Sarah Slappey’s wild paintings of naked female bodies. “Some might not like what they see,” she says, laughing. “But I like the friction.” Whoever said a more traditional patch means more conservative works too? — BU

### Meanwhile, in Basel...

Art Basel, the most important art fair of them all, didn’t spring out of nowhere – the city has always excelled with its world-class art spaces. This makes the tussle with Zürich for the title of foremost Swiss art city all the harder to judge. Here are the highlights of Basel’s art domain. — RB

### Stampa

The first stalwart of Basel’s commercial gallery scene, Stampa has been drawing parallels between painting, installation and performance since 1969. It offered shows to Nam June Paik, Ulrike Rosenbach and Pipilotti Rist at the beginning of their careers, while also representing the likes of the famously smoky works of Roman Signer and the witty installations of Katja Aufleger. Stampa shows its works between white walls and concrete-and-glass spaces but also possesses the friendlier atmosphere of the sitting room. The near-domestic setting of its best-in-class art bookshop is a browser’s high-gloss dream. [stampa-galerie.ch](http://stampa-galerie.ch)

### Von Bartha

Split between two imaginatively re-engineered buildings – one a very Ruscha-like petrol station, the other a project space in the Engadin hills – Von Bartha has been staging high-quality contemporary shows since 1970. In operation since movements such as zero and concrete art were mere glints in the art firmament’s eye, Von Bartha is a ventricle of Basel’s artistic heart. It understood that the “provocations” of some 30 years ago were set to become museum-standard exhibitions. Thankfully this shrine to cool modernism and fantastical shapes is still run by the Von Barthas, so a jolliness pervades the white walls too. [vonbartha.com](http://vonbartha.com)

### Laleh June

A stone’s throw from both the Kunsthalle and Kunstmuseum on none-more-apt Picassoplatz sits Laleh June’s classic white cube, which has been offering a triumphant international agenda of contemporary work since 2008. The year of the financial crash wasn’t an auspiciously wealthy one in which to open a gallery, and this risk-taking edge is reflected on the walls. A restless curatorial spirit embraces a multi-disciplinary approach: painting, sculpture, installation, video and public art are all catered for and often challengingly staged. [lalehJune.com](http://lalehJune.com)



## Edition VFO

*Self-sustaining creativity that gives members a chance to buy*

Edition VFO, in Zürich’s western Werd district, is an art institution that operates with an ingenious strategy. As it is supported by 700 members who not only contribute financially but help out voluntarily, it can sustain itself while also fostering emerging artists.

Launched in 1948, the Verein für Originalgraphik has always been dedicated to up-and-coming creatives but now its focus has extended to making sure that old-school production methods are preserved. “Traditional printing techniques, from linoleum cuts to serigraphy [screen printing], have become a rarity,” says David Khalat, who has been the association’s director for the past two years.

Every exhibition is realised thanks to collaboration between the artist and production specialists. The resulting works are published as limited, signed editions, which means that they are good value – wonderful pieces can be picked up for about CHF1,000 (€910). That’s why Khalat refers to Edition VFO as a publisher more than a gallery. In exchange for their services, members are remunerated with vouchers that can be used to purchase

VFO’s output – though non-members are also encouraged to buy.

Although many of the artists whose work is picked up by Edition VFO are Swiss, Khalat has welcomed a few global names too. His ambition to renew and modernise the historical association involves an experimental programme and the launch of some self-made publications – all aimed at raising awareness of printed graphics.

Yet the initiative that Khalat remains proudest of, besides expanding the gallery space in 2019, is his reorganisation of the institution’s vast archive, which is now displayed in a separate room at the back of the exhibition space. Neatly piled onto wooden shelves are pieces by artists who have become household names and whose work can be seen in museums across the world. Aspiring and established artists often come here for inspiration; gallerists and collectors would do well to do likewise. — CS

### What we’d buy:

1. Andrea Heller, ‘Subtle Shift I’
2. Vanessa Billy, ‘Mémoire Cellulaire (Marine)’
3. Niklaus Rüegg, ‘Chimney Sweep’
4. Federico Herrero, ‘Uvita’
5. Raphael Hefti, ‘The Speech of the Bleach’