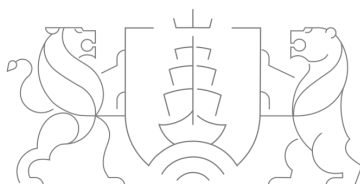


ART



ZÜRICH
06/2026

CONSULT

NEWSLETTER



Paul McCarthy
White Snow Dwarf, Grumpy
2012
Silicone (Yellow)
182.9 x 121.9 x 121.9 cm

COULD HEAVEN EVER BE LIKE THIS? A FIELD REPORT FROM ZÜRICH TO BASEL

The Swiss art calendar has long served as the final bastion before the summer season begins: a sequence that moves from Zurich Art Weekend into Art Basel, sustained by a continuous system of cultural programming and commercial momentum operating in close alignment, setting the tone for the autumn season to follow.

This year, the week carried particular significance following the news that Pace Gallery would cut around fifty jobs and part ways with numerous artists. As one of the Big Four galleries, the announcement raised more than a few questions. Is the model broken? Were the strong May auctions merely a flicker before the cooling? And above all: how is the art market really doing? The answer, perhaps, lies where one would least expect anything spectacular: Switzerland.

Few countries project greater stability. Foundations like Fondation Beyeler continue to break visitor records, while galleries such as Hauser & Wirth have transformed private collecting ambitions into global enterprises. Even as anxieties about market contraction ripple through the international art world, Switzerland's private art infrastructure remains remarkably robust.

That resilience, however, is not evenly distributed. Publicly funded institutions face many of the same pressures seen across the cultural sector elsewhere. Switzerland's strength, viewed up close, is not a feature of the system but of the private ecosystem that increasingly sustains it.



Zurich Art Weekend: proximity and pressure

Zurich presented itself in top form. Compact, elegant, international, demonstrating the depth of the city's cultural infrastructure, and yet perfectly manageable over the course of the weekend.

Rosa Barba's Zurich Art Prize presentation at Haus Konstruktiv continued her sustained investigation into light, language, and the apparatus of perception, while Mohammed Bourouissa at the Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst extended his ongoing engagement with labor, visibility, and social staging through carefully constructed re-enactments of public space.

Among the weekend's strongest presentations were Irma Blank's decades-long explorations of "wordless writing" at Galerie Mai 36 and Francis Alÿs's poetic play-worlds at Galerie Peter Kilchmann, two distinct but complementary investigations into how meaning is constructed beyond language itself. Taken as a whole, these exhibitions suggested a set of recurring concerns language, systems of representation, and the politics of visibility, that would continue to surface throughout the week.

Reena Spaulings and Luther Blissett's occupation of W26, curated by Fredi Fischli and Niels Olsen drew on traditions of collective authorship and institutional critique that do not sit easily within an art world increasingly organized around individual visibility and marketable identity.

A highlight of Sunday was a visit to Ursula Hauser's collection in Henau. The positioning of Louise Bourgeois and Paul McCarthy was particularly memorable: Bourgeois's intensely psychological sculptures meeting McCarthy's grotesque and often absurd vision of contemporary culture. The pairing revealed two radically different approaches to the same human concerns.

More broadly, the collection offered a reminder that the most compelling collections are built not around strategy but conviction. What began as a deeply personal engagement with art eventually helped give rise to Hauser & Wirth, yet the collection still retains the sense of curiosity and necessity from which it emerged.

Art Basel: confirmation rather than discovery

Monday traditionally begins with Unlimited. In its first edition under Ruba Katrib, Unlimited presented a more restrained selection than in recent years, with an emphasis on political and ecological conditions attempting to provide a somewhat curatorial framework.

Philip-Lorca diCorcia's re-staging of *Hustlers* appeared with renewed relevance in relation to contemporary regimes of visibility and labor, while Peter Hujar's portraits distilled the unsentimental intimacy of downtown New York in the 1970s and 80s. Oskar Schlemmer's large-scale presentation stood out as the section's other focal point: rare both in scope and in its museum-like clarity. Yet, an ambivalent impression lingered: modernism felt both freshly reactivated and already fully absorbed by the market, an avant-garde on its way to becoming a re-release.

If Unlimited signaled a tightening of curatorial intent, it also made visible several recurring thematic constellations across the fair: language as material, photography as document, the female body as contested site, and an ongoing engagement with memory, displacement, and Eastern European histories. Vanessa Beecroft's installation, overshadowed in part by Kanye West's appearance with Bianca Censori, added an unintended footnote to questions of performance, authorship and attention.

Beyond Unlimited, Liste expanded further, with 106 galleries from 36 countries and a notable surge of first-time participants. The strong presence of Seoul-based galleries pointed clearly to where parts of the next generation are currently being formed, reinforcing Liste's role as one of the fair's most reliable seismographs.

By contrast, Art Basel itself offered less discovery than confirmation. Commercial confidence remained concentrated at the top end of the market, while the mid-tier operated with greater caution and selectivity. At the emerging level, figuration and photography continued to dominate, with abstraction comparatively marginal.



Across the halls, blue-chip names were increasingly paired with younger positions: alongside Picasso, Richter or Warhol appeared Pamela Rosenkranz, Anri Sala, Shilpa Gupta, Rirkrit Tiravanija or Tarek Atoui. Stability below, futures above.

At the same time, Basel Exclusive, under which selected galleries withheld key works from pre-fair viewing and online platforms until the VIP opening, was framed as a return to the primacy of physical encounter. In practice, it pointed to a more structural tension: a market in which visibility and transaction increasingly precede physical presence. As some dealers noted, this simply formalized what primary galleries already do with last-minute studio works; for others, it reintroduced a sense of anticipation closer to the fairs of the 1990s, even as a younger generation of collectors now comfortably buys from PDFs.

The fair itself remained anchored at the top. A dozen Picassos were on view alongside works by Gerhard Richter, Joan Mitchell, Louise Bourgeois, David Hockney, Henry Moore, Andy Warhol, Damien Hirst, Anish Kapoor, Christopher Wool, Thomas Struth, Andreas Gursky, Georg Baselitz and Thomas Schütte. Quality was high, appetite for risk more limited. Over five percent of works exceeded the million-mark threshold, confirming Art Basel's position as a site where capital is parked rather than tested.

Pablo Picasso led reported sales; Joan Mitchell emerged as the fair's most expensive female artist. While the share of female representation has now reached roughly forty percent, the distribution of value at the top remains largely unchanged.

Upstairs, the tone shifted. Olafur Eliasson, Ugo Rondinone, Sarah Lucas, Ai Weiwei, Shilpa Gupta and Rirkrit Tiravanija reintroduced a more experimental register, contrasting the consolidation below. The mood across the fair was steady rather than euphoric: focused, active, but without the sense of expansion that defined earlier cycles. Sales were happening, booths were full, conversations precise.

Basel's institutions provided the intellectual counterweight to the fair. Above all, Pierre Huyghe at the Fondation Beyeler. Rarely has an exhibition felt so complete in its internal logic. Huyghe does not design a future, rather, he constructs a world after humanity. The exhibition space itself becomes an altered ecology: orange-filtered light, exposed ceiling structures, artificial organisms that seem to breathe. A monkey wearing a human mask moves restlessly through an abandoned laboratory in Fukushima. A black-clad figure with a golden head drifts silently through the rooms, emitting sounds that oscillate between human, machine and animal.

The atmosphere is hypnotic, beautiful and deeply disquieting. What Huyghe stages is not science fiction but a memento mori for the Anthropocene: a world in which other forms of intelligence have already begun to take the stage.

At the Kunstmuseum Basel, two very different futures then came into proximity. Helen Frankenthaler's floating color fields and Cao Fei's digital worlds appeared as opposing poles of the same narrative: postwar modernism's optimism on one side, the ambivalence of the digital present on the other. Color and data. Intuition and system and between them, the question of how we want to live.

Taken together, the exhibitions highlighted the museum's investment in expanding art-historical narratives beyond established centers and categories, while raising questions about how institutions frame, historicize, and absorb practices that emerged from markedly different social, political, and economic conditions.

Behind the sales and social choreography, a more explicit debate unfolded this year. Marc Spiegler questioned, in a widely discussed essay for the *New York Times*, whether the global gallery model is reaching its structural limits; too many fairs, too high costs, too few new collectors. Spiegler calls galleries the market's foundation and worries openly about its cracks. While Spiegler reflects on limits, his successor Noah Horowitz continues to expand the platform, most recently with Art Basel Qatar following Art Basel Paris. The question is maybe not only whether the model still works, but how far it can still grow.



Perhaps the future lies in local networks. Basel suggests, however, that they still require a global point of convergence. And that may explain the fair's peculiar strength. Basel is Switzerland in miniature: efficient, contained, almost understated. Yet for one week each year, it becomes the center of the art world. One speaks often of Swissness. Perhaps Swiss excellence is the more precise term.

Because what Art Basel ultimately stages is not expansion, but optimization: a system that functions with unusual consistency, the museums, the collections, the galleries, the infrastructure, the conversations, even the market itself. The numbers support it. Nowhere else are consistently higher prices achieved. Art Basel remains the queen of the art market. While the art world circulates its anxieties, Switzerland demonstrates how cultural capital is accumulated: slowly, institutionally, with remarkable continuity.

Marie-Kathrin Krimphoff and Carolyn Stocker-Seiler

This publication is for information and marketing purposes only. The provided information is not legally binding and neither constitutes a financial analysis, nor a sales prospectus, an offer for investment transactions, an asset management mandate or an investment idea and does not substitute any legal, tax or financial advice.

© Copyright Bergos AG.
All rights reserved.

