



Davia Maag (left) and Claudia Groeflin (right), with American artist Daniel Gordon, whose work was featured in their Zurich gallery last spring

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Artists of change

The influx of artists and art galleries into once-shabby neighbourhoods is making a difference ... adding an aesthetic veneer and igniting change.

By Mary Krienke | The phenomenon is familiar. SoHo in New York, London's East End, Mitte in Berlin, to name a few: urban areas where low rents and generous space lured enterprising artists, designers and art galleries into parts of town considered unsavoury. They took root, even flourished, and before long the upgrading process had begun with the opening of trendy shops and restaurants, the renovation of neglected buildings and the construction of new ones.

Is something similar happening in Swiss cities?

Zurich's Langstrasse

"I'm here because I wouldn't be anywhere else," declares Jean-Claude Freymond-Guth. His contemporary art gallery, Freymond-Guth & Co. Fine Arts, occupies a former garage in the multi-cultural sector of Zurich commonly known as Kreis 4, denoting its postal code, or Langstrasse, after its principal thoroughfare.

"This is the only place in German-speaking Switzerland with so many realities living alongside each other: illegal immigrants, prostitutes, drug dealers on one hand; young people, artists, students on

the other. It might be rough but it's realistic. It's enriching; it gives one freedom to try things out."

Asked whether the arrival of artists and art galleries has sparked the gentrification that has taken place in other cities, he cites this example: "A German investor who bought the building on Langstrasse where I used to have my gallery is said to be planning to convert it to up-market residential lofts – even a spa, the metaphor for gentrification. But it's happening slowly. That's the Swiss way."

Silvio Baviera, a multi-faceted artist,

writer, publisher and gallerist who was born in the neighbourhood and the first to open an art gallery there in 1973, has watched it change over the years, particularly in the last five.

“It used to be a lot crazier,” he says. “Today we still have drugs and prostitution, but also artists, about 15 art galleries, designers, fashion boutiques and chic restaurants ... and more policemen.”

Baviera stages periodic exhibitions and other ‘happenings’ in his combination gallery/contemporary art museum, which was dramatically expanded in 1990 with the addition of a multi-level exhibition space behind its modest storefront on Zwinglistrasse.

Zurich gallery hopping

A few steps down a sort of alleyway from Zwinglistrasse is one of the more recent arrivals: Groeflin Maag Galerie, which opened in 2007. Partners Claudia Groeflin and Davia Maag, both natives of Basel, met in London, where they received master’s degrees in art, followed by stints in Zurich galleries. They opened their first gallery in Basel’s Dreispitz – an industrial/warehouse area with big cultural plans, which seem to have stalled – before relocating to Zurich.

“For us it was always clear that we would eventually come to Zurich. This is the centre of the contemporary art scene,” Maag says.

“We love our bunker,” Groeflin adds. The sparse bunker-like space – formerly a workshop – is ideal for the contemporary artists they represent, among them American Daniel Gordon, whose photographs of cutout paper images and the human body in extreme situations were the subject of a spring show.

Zigzagging right, left, right, and then left again from Groeflin Maag, you arrive at Rotwandstrasse, where several galleries have set up shop and the gentrification is palpable.

At Rotwand Gallery, Sabine Kohler and Bettina Meier-Bickel, two young veterans of the Zurich contemporary art scene, have found that collectors like to come to this shabbier part of town – a contrast to how they live – to discover emerging talents. “Artists are drawn to places like this,” Meier-Bickel says. “The area is getting more and more trendy,” she adds, singling out a restaurant called Volkshaus and the Redroom fashion boutique, right around the corner. “And business is sur-



Séverine Spillmann and René Grüninger promote art-compatible design boutiques in Zurich’s Kreis 4 and Kreis 5

© Séverine Spillmann and René Grüninger

prisingly good, considering the current financial crisis.”

Parallel design influx

Art galleries and design boutiques frequently develop simultaneously and Langstrasse is no exception, with designers among the area’s pioneers. René Grüninger, who launched the Pink Flamingo fashion label with his ex-wife Ruth in Kreis 4 back in 1976, today runs a public relations company that promotes approximately 70 small design and fashion boutiques here – and in Kreis 5, another up-and-coming part of town.

In 2006, he decided that there was strength in numbers and formed a loose

association of like-minded merchants. Centrepiece of their activities is an annual promotional campaign, culminating in a weekend in May when the shops remained open on Sunday.

While the area is clearly becoming a thriving art, shopping and restaurant destination, he says that many locals are wary of the term ‘gentrification’. “They don’t want it to become too chic,” he says.

One decidedly chic destination, however, is Fabric Frontline, founded by one of Zurich’s most colourful entrepreneurs, Andi Stutz, and his two sisters in 1980. The company, which specialises in very high-quality silk scarves, neckties and fabrics, which it sells to top international de-



© Annli Wetter

Faye Fleming exhibits the work of emerging artists from several countries in her gallery in Geneva's QuARTier des Bains



© Barbara Polla

Geneva gallerist Barbara Polla with collector Gérard Millet (left) and artist Mario Rizzi (right), winner of the 2009 Prix du QuARTier des Bains



© Galerie von Bartha

Stefan von Bartha's "art garage" in the St. Johann area of Basel features artists on the cutting edge

signers, moved to Kreis 4 in 1985.

"Everyone thought I was completely crazy," Stutz recalls. "It was incredibly shabby and there wasn't a tree in sight."

So he created his own veritable jungle of trees and flowers, which today surrounds three adjoining buildings that house the showroom, boutique and a stylish restaurant.

"The area is still heavily foreign, and the red light district remains, but now there are more and more restaurants, and at least six clubs," he says. "Many people still think this is a strange place to be. It's considered dangerous. Yet the pickpockets don't come here; they stick to the Bahnhofstrasse."

Geneva's QuARTier des Bains

Geneva's answer to Zurich's Kreis 4/Langstrasse is promoted as QuARTier des Bains, a nod to the cluster of a dozen or so contemporary art galleries located on rue des Bains and the surrounding streets, which hold periodic simultaneous *vernissages*.

The neighbourhood is less animated, less rough 'n ready than its Zurich counterpart – but then that's Geneva.

"This was just a normal place" before artists and art galleries started arriving, according to Barbara Polla. She and her husband Luigi, both medical doctors, installed their cutting-edge Analix Forever gallery there in 1993. They established a

policy of introducing emerging artists, among them such international notables as Sarah Lucas and Tracey Emin, to French-speaking Switzerland.

About the same time, a former factory site was converted to an art complex, housing the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art (MAMCO) and the Centre d'Art Contemporain (CAC).

"Now 'les Bains' has become the trendy place to be for the young and arty," Polla says. The place was hopping during the well-attended evening openings this past May, when at least three new galleries opened their doors: quite extraordinary in these economic times.

The area did have a certain negative

notoriety, however, as the young English-woman who opened the Faye Fleming/Arquebuse gallery in 2006 found out when she was looking for a suitable space.

“Estate agents warned me that the area wasn’t safe,” she recalls. That didn’t deter Fleming, a veteran of Shoreditch and other dodgy areas in London’s East End. She found the perfect spot, a former garage for water pump vehicles, where she shows the work of emerging artists from several countries.

What about Basel?

In contrast to Zurich’s dynamic scene, Basel, whose museums rank among the world’s greatest and where the art world converges each June for the annual Art Basel fair, doesn’t really have a concentration of art galleries. In fact, they’re few and far between.

Erlenmatt, a scruffy neighbourhood located behind the Basel Messe, showed potential for art-impelled regeneration, when artists, designers and other creative types started claiming the area as their own around 2000.

There, Marc de Puechredon saw an opportunity to create a contemporary cultural conglomerate in E-Halle, a vast 4,000-square-metre customs hall adjacent to the former German railway yards, where a huge residential complex is under construction.

He established an art gallery in part of the space in 2007, which left plenty of room for a restaurant and other alternative cultural activities. He had hoped the development project would reflect the artistic drift of the neighbourhood, but this doesn’t appear to be happening. While E-Halle remains part of the initial regeneration, its long-range future is a question mark.

Undeterred – even inspired – by this residential behemoth next door, de Puechredon and Clare Kenny, the gallery’s curator and exhibitions manager, are planning a 2010 show called ‘Home Sweet Home’, featuring reflections by several artists on neighbourhood development and how people live in such surroundings.

The show will draw on Kenny’s personal experience of participating in the emergence of London’s East End art scene, as well as the thesis she wrote for her master’s degree from the Chelsea School of Art in London, which examined links between culture and industry.



© Jean-Claude Freymond-Guth

Jean-Claude Freymond-Guth says of his contemporary art gallery in Zurich’s Langstrasse area, “I wouldn’t be anywhere else.”

Ripe for change

Asked what other Basel neighbourhoods might prove fertile ground, Kenny suggested St. Johann, and so I decided to take a look. Located 10 minutes by tram from the Bahnhof, this is a mixed residential neighbourhood, with ‘shabby chic’ potential. I discovered that art had already taken root – in the form of Galerie von Bartha, with two gas pumps out in front. Stefan von Bartha, whose father is a well-known Basel art dealer, decided to apply his experience gained while working for Galerie Nordenhake in Berlin and start a contemporary adjunct to the family business.

Looking for a large space at low cost, he ran across a combination gas station/garage, which he describes as “really, really, really bad but absolutely perfect”. He converted it to a sleek 750-square-metre gallery that opened in June 2008, plus an apartment, garage and storage space. He leased the pumps to Avia: a win-win situation.

St. Johann already has a sort of arty edge, with a non-profit artists’ cooperative called New Jersey nearby, many students, artists and graphic designers in the vicinity and active urban development underway.

Not as dramatic as in New York, London or Berlin ... but it’s happening.



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Shopping on Zurich’s Langstrasse