



Wiels, 2019.
Photo Andrea Anoni

THE BRUSSELS FACTOR

Dubbed “the new Berlin” by the New York Times and “an epicenter of contemporary art” by the Washington Post, Brussels has a vibrant art scene that has attracted quite some international attention in recent years - and rightly so. With curators, gallerists, and artists from all corners of the globe settling down in the coveted Belgian capital, we spoke to some of them to find out what it is exactly that made them choose Brussels.

Gabriel Kuri

Conceptual sculptor Gabriel Kuri often works with found and repurposed materials whose function, physical properties, and social and economic reverberations he explores. Born in Mexico, he returned to his native country after his studies at London's prestigious Goldsmiths university, before moving to Brussels in 2003. He's been living and working there ever since, apart from a three-year stint in Los Angeles. Kuri is represented by Sadie Coles HQ in London, Esther Schipper in Berlin, kurimanzutto in Mexico City, and Franco Noero in Turin.

Interview by Sarah Schug
Photographer Mireille Roobaert

L'OFFICIEL ART: How did you get the idea to move to Brussels?

GABRIEL KURI: When my career started to take off internationally, my wife and I thought it'd be a good idea to have a base in Europe. I had already visited Belgium a couple of times, and it had always been a place that attracted me. It seemed like a place where it would be possible to reinvent myself - and today I'm still here. I live with a certain lightness on my feet here, which I quite like. I think Brussels is a place that allows you to live on your own terms. It doesn't have a monolithic culture that strongly imposes a certain behavior. And people are quite gentle; they're always willing to speak your language, for example. There's a certain chaos that I like as well.

When you arrived in Brussels, Wiels didn't even exist yet. Has a lot changed?

Yes, definitely. It's much more international now. The area that has evolved the most is the commercial gallery scene. The increase of good quality galleries over the last 10 years is quite amazing. But of course, even before that, Brussels had everything it needed already. It has its place in art history and a lot of cultural baggage, which allowed the art scene to develop in an interesting and complex way. It's not a place like Miami where there's next to nothing, but then rich people arrive and open their foundations and Art Basel comes, and then some kind of strange art scene emerges, but only one month a year, during the fair, and it may not even be remembered 10 years from now.

Do you see the changes as a positive thing?

I live here in Saint-Gilles, five minutes away from my studio. The other day I had a flyer in my mailbox about the gentrification of the neighborhood. Yes, there have been changes, but do we have to call it gentrification? Is there anything wrong with a gallery or a very nice cheese shop opening in your street? It's not comparable to London, where there has been speculation and aggressive foreign investment. What's happening in Brussels is gentle and visible and I think a lot of it is coming from the citizens themselves. It's changing, growing, getting more lively, certain things fall into place, and that's all positive. People are curious about Brussels now. Some don't



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Kuri's studio in Brussels' Saint-Gilles neighborhood.

understand its charm, because it's not that evident. It's not a city with a lot of tourist appeal. The Belgian modesty keeps everything very low-key.

Why did you choose Brussels over London, for example?

London will always remain a vital part of me, but that doesn't mean I'm up for paying the huge human cost it takes to survive in a place like that. It's not just that the cost of living is cheaper here. I also don't like this rat race, which creates a certain culture and patterns and attitudes shaping the aspirations and behaviors of people. I remember, a year or two after I graduated from Goldsmiths, there was this feeling around that just surviving was already an accomplishment. I thought there had to be more than that. Living in London is very, very tough. And it's only become tougher, which is why a lot of artists have left and never returned. And that's a pity.

Do you feel like moving here has unlocked a lot of possibilities for you?

I've been living in Brussels for a long time now, but I'm perceived as an international artist, not a Belgian one. Moving here has definitely unlocked possibilities for me here in Europe, but I also ask myself if I'm not missing out on certain things by not being in Mexico. For example, when the Latin American Committee of the Tate goes to Mexico to do studio visits, I'm not there. But it does make more sense for me to be here: When I finish a piece, and I'm excited about it, I can call Sadie or Esther and the morning after a transporter will come and the next evening the work will already be at the gallery. It would take so much longer from Mexico and be much more costly. Plus, I can just take the train and go to meetings and be back the next day. Brussels is perfect for moving around Europe.

You left for Los Angeles for a couple of years. How does it compare, and what made you come back?

I wanted a change of air and I've always liked LA. After three years, I'd had enough. I find it more real here, more truthful. It's not as

utilitarian and a little more human. The art scene in LA is very different. The biggest difference is probably all the high-end art schools there. The main figures of the scene, its leading voices, have all been teachers, such as Baldessari for example. This is the only thing Brussels lacks. People will hate me for saying that, but it's not a place that attracts foreign artists of a certain stature to teach, for quite obvious reasons: The pay here is very low in comparison.

Is your practice influenced by your surroundings?

Of course. I noticed that in Brussels, the material vein of my work has developed more strongly. I'm a little bit on the margin of the flow of information, and then I pay more attention to material. Brussels is quite a rich city when it comes to that, and the regulations aren't that harsh. You can easily stumble on a construction site where many different materials are exposed... All that, it talks to me. I'm a maker and form and material is a very important part of my discourse.



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