

Berlin Art Complex Rises From a Brewery's Ruins

By DAVID BELCHER, OCT. 16, 2014



The Swiss artist Roman Signer assembled a model airplane in the voluminous exhibit hall at the Kindl Center for Contemporary Art. Two large fans blow air on the plane, causing it to spiral as if descending rapidly. Credit Jens Ziehe, Berlin

BERLIN — In this city's not-quite-yet-hip Neukölln district, the Kindl Center for Contemporary Art is taking shape in a vast abandoned brewery thanks to the vision of two art collectors — and an artist and his nose-diving airplane.

The Kindl, named after the popular beer that was brewed at the facility for 70 years before the company relocated to a larger space outside the city, is the brainchild of the Swiss art collecting couple Burkhard Varnholt, a banker, and Salome Grisard, an architect.

The facility was built in the late 1920s in the German Expressionist style. Its red-brick facade and imposing main tower evoke the Tate Modern in London — both in its physical aspect and as an example of how a transformed industrial space can slowly help revive a neighborhood.

The art complex, which covers 5,500 square meters, or 59,000 square feet, will open fully next summer at a cost of 6 million euros, or \$7.7 million, with two more exhibition areas, several artists' studios and a cafe in the large space amid six enormous dormant brewing coppers. It will be devoted entirely to new art and will not feature the private collection of Mr. Varnholt and Ms. Grisard, who live in Zurich. They are funding the entire project aside from revenue generated from admissions and occasional space rentals for special events.

Judging by a recent visit during the fourth annual Berlin Art Week, a citywide celebration of the city's burgeoning arts scene in different galleries and repurposed venues, the Neukölln neighborhood, which lies in an industrial area of the former American sector of East Berlin, is off the beaten path of the city's hipper gallery areas, which have attracted collectors from all over the world.

"Neukölln is more grass-roots than other, more artistically established neighborhoods in Berlin," said Andreas Fiedler, the center's Swiss-born curator. "But here are a lot of artist spaces and a lot of artists produce here."

"The success of Berlin as a center for artists is because of who is here, who has been here, and the freedom that is based on the myth of the '90s," he continued, referring to the decade after the fall of the Berlin Wall when the city exploded with art and refurbishment. "It's still a very liberal city, and you can realize here what you can't necessarily in other parts of Europe."

That is evident in the main hall of the art center, the only room currently open to the public, where a two-seat yellow plane dangles from the 20-meter, or 65-foot, ceiling of the former boiler house of Kindl Beer.

The facility's massive room helped to draw the installation that will anchor the new art center's first phase. "Kitfox Experimental," by the 76-year-old Swiss artist Roman Signer, who is known for his outrageous outdoor installations, is an assemble-yourself airplane (the popular Kitfox brand), with two large fans blowing from opposite walls to move the plane in a circular motion. It hangs upside down, spinning from the force of the fans, and their deafening sound adds to the almost movielike sense that the plane is spiraling toward earth.

For Mr. Signer, finding a space to create a monumental artwork like "Kitfox Experimental" is rare. He said his idea for the piece came from a childhood memory.

"As a boy, I was lying by a river, looking into the sun, and I saw an airplane high in the sky, probably a military plane, with a buzzing engine. Suddenly the plane turned downward and started plummeting toward me," he recalled. "At first I didn't realize it, but the pilot was aiming his plane at me. I jumped up and ran away. Then he turned the plane at the last moment and righted it. He was playing a joke. He saw me and wanted to scare me."

That reaction is something Mr. Fiedler hopes the first visitors to the Kindl will experience.

"It can be such an overwhelming and threatening experience if you go under the airplane, especially if you stand directly under the nose and look up," Mr. Fiedler said. "For me, it evokes the idea — and terror — of flying. It is uncomfortable and meditative at the same time."

A recent tour of the facility with Mr. Fiedler was a study in a raw space being transformed by both construction workers and the vision of its owners. A large Art Deco clock, frozen in time at 11:35 a.m., when production at the brewery ended in 2005, hangs over a room being gutted and recast for an exhibition area.

Another exhibition area, on the second floor, will be a more conventional space with white walls and minimal natural light. Gigantic steel girders that crisscross the room can either be utilized or hidden, depending on the exhibition, Mr. Fiedler said.

The facility's top floor, six flights up, will be an exhibition space with views across the rooftops of Berlin, and an already completed saw-toothed roof celebrates the natural light.

Mr. Fiedler acknowledged the challenge presented by a space where the view above and across the skyline are constantly distracting.

"This is the danger of having such an amazing space so high above Berlin," Mr. Fiedler said, waving his hand toward the skyline. "This could easily upstage most artworks."

Yet the space is what caught the eye of the Kindl's art benefactors, Mr. Fiedler said.

"Burkhard Varnholt and Salome Grisard did not come to Berlin with the intention of starting a project here in the city or in this space," Mr. Fiedler said. "In reality it was really the other way around. They encountered the building and then thought about doing something with it."

Mr. Varnholt acknowledged that the unconventional space might seem risky in a neighborhood far from the tourist crowds of central Berlin.

"I'm reminded of what George Bernard Shaw once said," he said, by way of response: "'We want a few mad people now. See where the sane ones have landed us.'"