

INTERVIEW WITH HAROLD T'KINT DE ROODENBEKE
CHAIRMAN OF BRAFA

BRAFA 2018, unprecedented and unparalleled quality!



Harold t'Kint de Roodenbeke, you are inaugurating Brafa as its Chairman for the sixth time now. What does 2018 have in store?

The 2017 grape harvest was considered to presage a dip in wine production in many countries, but 2018 is shaping up to be a wonderful vintage for Brafa! In the wake of the 2017 edition that elicited great enthusiasm and a record number of visitors, the 2018 vintage is forecast as exceptional.

A word about the new participants this year.

There will be fifteen new galleries participating out of a total of 134, and five returnees. The number of requests remains very high for the limited number of spaces available. The rotation is barely 10%, and there are frequent returns by exhibitors who like to exhibit on alternate years. Our goal is, as always, to maintain a certain balance among specialities, and the 2018 selection will bring its share of novelty. One new exhibitor specializes in Arte Povera, a domain seldom represented in previous years at Brafa, another in modern British painting and sculpture, and a third offers a highly contemporary take on the curiosity cabinet... The inclusion of fifteen new galleries, all foreign and of international calibre, will add a new dimension to the fair and guarantee an overall quality unparalleled in Belgium.

How does the process of selecting galleries work?

It's actually very simple: with a very few exceptions, we give priority to the exhibitors of the previous year or years. It's a sort of reward for fidelity! After that initial round of invitations has been responded to, we know exactly how many stands are available for new exhibitors, and can begin to examine the new applications we have received. The first criterion is the quality of the selection of works they propose to exhibit, the seriousness of the gallery, and the references they can present. We are also careful not to give disproportionate prominence to one speciality over any other, for we strive for a certain equilibrium between the different specialities. Two years ago, we therefore created a contemporary section that incorporates galleries representing the primary art market, something Brafa previously lacked despite the numerous requests we had received. Some have wrongly accused us of wanting to become a contemporary art fair, but that is far from true: we simply wanted to supplement our panel with a speciality we did not yet represent. Our aim remains to offer the broadest possible panorama of all art forms. Lastly, in choosing between applicants of equal quality, geographical criteria play a role. Some territories remain to be conquered, but we have purposefully become more international, because hosting exhibitors from diverse locations helps us make the fair better known worldwide.

You are once again hosting a prestigious guest of honour, this time Christo. How did you pull off such a coup?

The truth is that the Christo project was the fulfilment of a slightly crazy dream, and the culmination of longstanding effort! You can well imagine that even getting an appointment with such an artist is quite an achievement. We knew that a major retrospective was being planned in Brussels, so we used all our resources to arrange to meet and convince the artist. Evidently, Christo was interested by our proposal and a meeting was set up to coincide with his visit to Brussels. After that everything fell into place very quickly! Christo had a specific idea of what he wanted to present to us, and was both enthusiastic and charming, a truly great man of the art world. By way of anecdote, we met at a famous restaurant in the Sablon and he drew his proposal on the back of a placemat. I preserved the magical moment in a photo. The drawing complete, he signed it and gave it to us. Since then, it has been on display in the Brafa office. It is a wonderful souvenir and a magnificent gift!

What will his presence at Brafa consist of?

We intend, naturally, to keep some secrecy around his plan, partly at his request. Christo wished to exhibit a key work from his artistic journey at an event attended by collectors. His decision was not, of course, to 'wrap the fair', something one might perhaps have expected, but rather to invite us to enter into his universe and thought processes. The work to be shown will be the largest ever exhibited at Brafa! But aside from its dimensions, its historic character is also of particular interest. It is in fact an early work, dating from 1965-66. This was a period when Christo focused on Show Cases, Show Windows and Store Fronts; imaginary display windows and storefronts made primarily of elements recovered from demolished buildings. The one we will exhibit was made for a museum, and has not been on display since 2001. Generally, people only associate Christo with his wrapping of monuments such as the Pont-Neuf in Paris, the Reichstag in Berlin and with his enormous landscape installations such as 'The Gates' in Central Park, New York and 'Floating Piers' on Lake Iseo in Italy.

The aspect of his work we are presenting at Brafa will give us, I hope, new access to and a new understanding of the trajectory of this engaging and unparalleled artist.

Brafa has also put together an ambitious programme of daily talks. What is being offered this year?

This is another of Brafa's strengths, for the Brafa Art Talks really add value to the artistic content of the fair. Speakers include museum directors, collectors and gallerists with diverse art-related specialities who address a wide range of topics. This year we are hosting Angela Rosengart, a Swiss gallerist and collector who grew up - quite literally - with the masters of 20th century art. From early childhood she accompanied her father, also a gallery owner, to the studios of Picasso, Matisse, Braque, Miró, and many other now renowned artists. She built her collection within a foundation, and then a museum, in Lucerne. Today it is one of the largest collections of modern paintings in the world. We will also welcome Dominique Szymusiak, Honorary Curator of the Matisse Museum in Le Cateau-Cambrésis, whose decisive approach has made the museum one of the most remarkable in France. We are delighted that the Tretyakov Gallery from Moscow is also on the programme. Closer to home, Léon Spilliaert will be the subject of a lecture given by Anne Adriaens-Pannier, Honorary Curator of the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium. Michel Draguet, the Royal Museums' current Director General, will speak on Magritte and contemporary art. Not to forget a voyage into the arts of Oceania in the company of Nicolas Cauwe, Curator of the Royal Museums of Art and History, or a discussion of the art of the Wunderkammer (cabinet of curiosities)...

Neither music lovers nor aficionados of fine cars will be forgotten ...

Indeed, since we are proud to announce two new partnerships. One is with the online radio station 'La Classica', who will provide a continuous broadcast of classical music and will manage the musical programme at the fair. The second is with BMW who will provide the shuttle services from the parking lots, something that is always very much appreciated by our guests.

A final word about the vetting process, that is, the examination by experts of artworks before they are exhibited. This has become an indispensable part of major art fairs.

We were in fact among the very first to set up such a process, and I can assure you that it is particularly strict at Brafa. We call only upon experts known to be the best in their respective fields, organized into some two dozen commissions. They travel throughout Europe and even to the United States on behalf of Brafa. Each commission is made up of several experts in the domain, and all their decisions are taken collectively, to ensure maximum transparency and integrity. We were also the first to invite a scientific and radiographic laboratory to the fair in order to supplement and refine the judgment of the experts. Our vetting model is now being exported and I am delighted to hear it. The field of art remains a place for amateurs, collectors and art-lovers. I am a part of that, and we owe it to ourselves to provide all guarantees possible to our visitors. I think that in this area, we all have to work together.

The entire art market needs clarity, benchmarks and confidence in order to be able to develop. Yet I notice only too often that it is sometimes unfortunately criticized for reasons that lack justification.

You are reaching the end of your second, and in principle final term as Chairman of Brafa. What conclusions would you be tempted to draw from your experience?

I am not by nature inclined to dwell on the past. I prefer to concentrate on the present and reflect on the future. I announced, at the start of my term of office, that I considered myself primarily to be a team leader and guide, and insisted clearly on the need to involve everyone on the team. Being Chairman is certainly an exciting role, but also a highly demanding one, and the contributions of new people, new ideas and new projects are indispensable for Brafa to continue to develop and grow.

Interview by Bruno Nélis