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Bettina Russo and Chaja Lang founded Rue Hippolyte to combine art, craft and the kind of creative joie de vivre that makes for a good party. We join them for a festive evening to discuss the diverse art installations, functional objects and tailor-made interiors they offer.

Bettina Russo and Chaja Lang had spent many conversations and long lunches trying to settle on a name for their design and art consultancy, when a friend suggested Rue Hippolyte. The pair loved the concept immediately; they were inspired by the world of Swiss sculptor Alberto Giacometti, whose Parisian studio at 46 Hippolyte-Maindron in the French capital's 14th arrondissement hosted names such as Picasso, Modigliani and Brancusi. "His studio was a hub for some of the most celebrated artists and designers of the time," says Lang. "Even furniture was made there. He and his brother Diego worked as a pair – just like Bettina and me."

Russo and Lang describe themselves as "interior curators and art lovers". Their work deals in design objects and decoration as well as abstract, expansive site-specific artworks. "It's all about telling a story through combining art, crafts, interior design and other objects," says Lang, who once ran her own contemporary art gallery in Zürich.

This evening the pair are adding the finishing touches to an event at Russo's art nouveau apartment building in Zürich's Kreis 6.

The night will act as a kind of rehearsal dinner for a new concept, which will demonstrate to clients and assorted guests a complete Rue Hippolyte take on Christmas decor: one that's wildly eclectic, completely bespoke and full of good humour.

As their friends begin to arrive at the apartment, they are greeted with a Rue Hippolyte-designed bushy spruce. The tree sits on the parquet floor sporting huge velvet rhombuses, abstract circles and vintage tinsel. Beeswax candles flicker in classic wire holders on its branches and a miniature army of cute antique nutcracker figurines stands protectively at its trunk.

"We had an appetite for a crazy tree from the get-go," says Bettina. She explains that the project began last year, when Rue Hippolyte was approached by Chantal Blatzheim of the CBCC cultural consultancy to work on the interior for her pop-up Christmas salon. Taking place at an art gallery just off Rämistrasse, the exhibition showcased the work of German designer and artist Mike Meiré in the weeks before Christmas. "We wanted to create an all-Rue Hippolyte artistic intervention – and

DECK THE HALLS



1. Crockery by Swiss ceramist Ursula Vogel
2. Rue Hippolyte's Chaja Lang (on left) and Bettina Russo
3. The pair's 'crazy' Christmas tree



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we love to host art dinners,” says Lang, who emerges from the kitchen in a long, ruffled, pink-satin dress, with large Colville earrings dangling from her lobes. Much like this evening, these are art-inspired meals that follow specific themes and integrate design and craft into every inch of the experience. They are also currently working on an event for the Israel Museum at Kunsthaus Zürich.

Drinks in hand, the assembled party is ushered towards Rue Hippolyte’s Christmas table. There, a cluster of Charlotte Perriand-designed M éribel dining chairs surrounds a vibrant array of textures and colours. An African wax-print table cloth is set with placemats that were hand-made by Russo from burlap, with stitched-on shreds of ornate fabric and brocade. Bright-red dinner plates made by Swiss ceramist Ursula Vogel for Rue Hippolyte sit next to patterned napkins tied together with artfully mismatched chalet-style red-and-white chequered ribbons. Vases of gladioli and candles in bright ceramic holders complete the look.

The pair have also commissioned a one-off art piece for the occasion. Over a plate of Russo’s pasta with fresh porcini mushrooms, Karolin Braegger, a Vienna-based Swiss artist, explains how she cut the tip off the magnificent Nordmann fir, decorated it with coloured glass crystals and mounted it on the ceiling with a transparent thread so that it would dangle over the rest of the tree. It mimics a 1980s Artemide chandelier with Murano glass elements that Braegger recently discovered and admired. She also discreetly painted the cuts with a glimmering dark-green varnish. “I like the idea of deconstruction,” says Braegger. “I cut the tip off the tree, just as fashion designers Viktor & Rolf cut holes into their clothes.”

While the conversations buzz at the dinner table, Russo goes out to her spacious balcony to nurse the fire in the outdoor grill to embers, while Lang fetches the marinated chicken thighs from the kitchen. “I have known Bettina basically since birth,” says Lang. “She is my mum’s godchild and only a few months older than me. As children, we spent all our summers together, either in Ticino, where Bettina grew up, or with my family in Zurich.”

Rue Hippolyte’s moment came after the closure of Lang’s contemporary art gallery Boltelang, which she co-ran with fellow art anthropologist Anna Bolte. Russo and Lang then took on the lease of the Limmatstrasse space. “We used the empty gallery space as a laboratory to experiment and see how our talents could work together,” says Lang, serving a cold aubergine and tomato dish with

mozzarella to the guests. “We opened in November 2019 with a first exhibition showing.”

Russo points to a jolly-looking bean bag sitting on the floor. “This was the first object that we created as Rue Hippolyte, in collaboration with the LA-based Swiss artist Christina Forrer,” she says. “She is known for her colourful weavings and wanted to create something more approachable.”

One of the next collaborations, a “new Plia chair” covered in fabric designed by Dakar-based artist Omar Ba, sits in the lounge. What all the objects have in common is that they are vibrant and bold, and display Rue Hippolyte’s approach of treating art, design and crafts the same. “An interior is not about following trends or creating an image,” says Russo as the evening progresses. “It’s about creating your very own story.”

Looking at the details in her apartment, from the Glas Italia plexiglass table with rounded edges (paired with funky high wooden chairs) to the black graffiti in the bathroom, the talent for bringing things together is very apparent. “Interiors were always my passion,” says Russo. “I have been collecting vintage furniture from designers such as Vico Magistretti, Enzo Mari and Ingo Maurer. But I also found interesting pieces in junk shops, including my carved coffee table or a piece of traditional Swiss woodwork.”

Having had enough of all the talk, Russo’s children are loudly claiming their right to dessert. (Their dog Dakuna, wagging her tail, seems to agree and gets a well-deserved doggie treat.) “Let’s take our pudding to the tree,” suggests Russo and, before we know it, everyone is scooping ice cream out of their bowls while sitting on the floor or lounging on the sofa around the most eccentric Christmas tree they have ever seen.

Rue Hippolyte’s goal is to rethink Christmas as a festivity rooted in tradition. “It is about creating a new, refreshing feel and look that takes cues from the past but is open to our very own rule-breaking imagination,” says Lang, relighting an extinguished candle. Most of all, Rue Hippolyte celebrates the abundance of life – the warm feeling that family and friends provide. — K
Limited editions of Rue Hippolyte’s exclusive Christmas objects and tree are available for hire.



1. Table set in front of an Enzo Mari artwork
2. Bean bag with fabric by Christina Forrer
3. Sculptural fridge designed with Clemence Seilles
4. Plia chair with fabric by Omar Ba
5. Festive adornments for Rue Hippolyte
6. Table sculpture by Patrick Hari