

## Milan and Turin

### City Report

As artistic capitals of postwar Italy, Milan and Turin are expressions of a modern and progressive culture – despite having developed almost contradictory attitudes towards its image

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‘Yes, I think that Italy could be the “new Poland”’, an important Berlin gallerist says to me, as we stand squashed between the DJ’s console (which is rigorously playing revival tracks) and the busy crowd in a small bar in Mitte earlier this year. This definition leaves me slightly dumbfounded, and I’m at a loss to reply. I’m glad that he recognizes the changes taking place, of which I feel a part, but he has touched a nerve in terms of a residue of national pride. What exactly does he mean by the ‘new Poland’? What kind of comparison is that? With all due respect to the Polish nation, I would like to remind my interlocutor of the glories of Italy’s ancient cultural history and that the country has been at the centre of the art world for centuries. Instead, I do no more than express mild surprise at the analogy and move on.

The dealer’s definition and my understated response say much about the way Italy and its culture are perceived. He considers Italy little more than an ‘exotic’ place (in the same way that he considers Poland ‘exotic’), whereas I think of it in terms of its long and venerable history. As a matter of fact, though, contemporary art in Italy has indeed been relatively untouched by more recent waves of art-world fashion. Not being perceived as a culture that gives rise to new approaches to art, as the cradle of the avant-garde, Italy is often seen instead in a folksy, picturesque light, lowering the level of debate. The country’s celebrated artistic legacy – UNESCO statistics report that Italy possesses 80 per cent of the global artistic heritage – is more of an impediment than an incentive when it comes to thinking about the contemporary art scene. In Italy cultural and educational activity is focused on the conservation and study of that glorious but distant history more than on the creation of a new one. Contemporary culture is usually seen with a mixture of suspicion and irony, even by the bourgeoisie and the entrepreneurial class, which ought to be the driving forces behind artistic regeneration and innovation.

The sadder truth is that, for a long time now, politics, economy and culture in Italy have not been geared to imagining and planning for the future and have not invested the necessary economic and human resources to build it. Instead of a process of long-term management for the future there has been an ad hoc approach that concentrates on simply muddling through for the moment with the least possible damage. The disastrous last government of Silvio Berlusconi (2001–6) further reduced the already minimal budget for scientific and cultural research. This has possibly exacerbated Italy’s ‘brain drain’: the exodus overseas of an ever greater number of people from various fields, seeking more generous economic resources and a more open and meritocratic system in which they can flourish.

Italy, like Narcissus (there’s Classical culture for you!), finds gratification in its own beauty but seems to shy away from a deeper relationship with the outside world, confusing the image it has of

itself with reality. The famous Italian inheritance (creativity, ingenuity, improvisation, flexibility) may give rise to important individual achievements but cannot resolve serious long-term structural problems. 'Italy, proverbially a poor country inhabited by the rich,' the writer and journalist Michele Serra recently noted in the newspaper *La Repubblica*, 'is marked by an obvious gap between private fortunes and public shortages, with a meagre infrastructure and poor services.'

But the aforementioned Berlin gallery owner is perhaps right, because he notes the signs of an ever more visible change in the last years. Being an informed observer, he is aware of an increasing number of curators, critics and artists who are doing valuable work, of a number of dynamic and informed collectors (some of whom have opened private foundations) and of the presence of a significant number of interesting new commercial galleries at international art fairs. He hears Italian being spoken increasingly at these fairs, and at international exhibitions and biennials throughout the world. During the ten years or more that he has been working in this field he cannot recall a similar situation. I cannot but agree.

But how did we get to this point? And what does the future hold? Perhaps as in no other European country, society and culture in Italy are traditionally multi-faceted, divided, stratified. Perennially suspended between the drive towards modernization and atavistic archaism, between the future and the vernacular, Italy resists any homogeneous description. Seen in this light, Milan and Turin, little more than an hour apart along the motorway, have for several decades been in the forefront of contemporary artistic culture in Italy, in terms of both production and critical debate.

As economic and intellectual capitals of the post-World War II period, these two cities reflect different aspects of a similar cultural identity. Both are expressions of a fundamentally modern and progressive culture, but they have developed different, almost contradictory, aspects towards it. To simplify drastically, Milan has traditionally been the city of the more dynamic and innovative bourgeoisie, of the culture of the entrepreneurial and leisured classes. The art made between the mid-1950s and '60s reflects the more optimistic, technological, progressive approach, but with a smattering of irony and lightness. Bruno Munari, Lucio Fontana, Enrico Castellani, Piero Manzoni, Gruppo T, Gianni Colombo and his brother Joe (the designer) all lived and worked in Milan. Much of the design and the most interesting architecture of the 1950s and '60s was developed here. All of Italy's leading art, architecture and design journals were founded and are still published in the city. In short, it represents a culture of general progress.

Turin, a city with a monarchic and then an industrial history, intellectually sophisticated and a bit French, represents the more critical and disillusioned side of the drive towards the modern. Traditionally it is the standard-bearer for higher, more élitist culture, with a more rural outlook than Milan and less Pop. (The Situationist movement was born in the countryside near Turin.) Arte Povera was developed here, in the work of artists such as Giovanni Anselmo, Alighiero e Boetti, Giuseppe Penone, Michelangelo Pistoletto and Gilberto Zorio (all of whom come from Turin and its environs) and galleries such as Notizie and, most importantly, Gian Enzo Sperone. It represents the artistic side of a social and political reaction to the unfulfilled promise of the technological and materialist Utopia offered by Milan. The contrast between Turin and Milan was, and perhaps still is, an opposition between the 'apocalyptic' and the 'integrated', to quote a famous essay by Umberto Eco ('Apocalittici e Integrati', 1964), who is Piedmontese by birth and Milanese by adoption. While the Milan cultural scene flirted with technological progress and the culture of the project in order to move forward, Turin believed in reaching that objective in a more romantic and lyrical key, via a kind of regression to 'pre-modernity' (with the ironic outcome that, thinking of the international success of Arte Povera, those who once were the 'apocalyptic' have now become more integrated than the 'integrated').

After the pictorial mythologies of the Transavanguardia painting movement of the 1980s, northern

Italy, and above all Milan, reacted with a new art, more detached and conceptual, played out through a romantic fragility, through minimal and ironic gestures. From the early 1990s a new generation of gallery owners, critics and artists picked up the threads of a history that seemed forgotten. It was above all the artists – Mario Airò, Stefano Arienti, Maurizio Cattelan, Amedeo Martegani, Luca Pancrazzi, for example – who stressed the importance of Alighiero e Boetti. Thanks to the presence of several art magazines, the best art academy, some dynamic and up-to-date collectors, new galleries and critics, Milan became the focus and the capital of Italian art, with some of those who migrated to the city leaving almost immediately: Cattelan and Vanessa Beecroft, for example, lured by the excitement of America and consequent international fame. (Around the same time, but from different places, Monica Bonvicini and Francesco Bonami also moved abroad.)

Courses run by Luciano Fabro and Alberto Garutti at the Accademia di Brera produced a group of interesting artists from various parts of Italy, including Simone Berti, Gianni Caravaggio, Roberto Cuoghi, Lara Favaretto, Giuseppe Gabellone, Deborah Ligorio, Marcello Maloberti, Diego Perrone and, a little later, Christian Frosi, Massimo Grimaldi, Riccardo Previdi, Pietro Roccasalva and Patrick Tuttofuoco. It is in Milan that most of the more interesting artists of the contemporary Italian scene live and work today. Ever more curious and cosmopolitan, some travel or even live for short periods abroad, but most prefer to stay tied to Mamma Italia: there is something romantic, solitary and individualist at the heart of Italian artists' culture and education, which restricts their breadth of vision. Leaving questions of mentality aside, this is not all their fault – only recently have some residencies abroad been created, and Italy still lacks an efficient organ of support on a par with the Goethe Institute or the British Council.

At the risk of making a huge oversimplification, I would say that Milan's is a formalist, elegant and, above all, dense art. It is certainly not political or social, or at least not in documentary, content-driven ways. It prefers poetic allusion to didacticism, lightness to criticism, density to analysis. It can be corrosive and expressive, but hardly extremist, sentimental but not intimate, existential but very rarely dramatic.

For the younger generation of Italian artists the possibilities for growth and confrontation are increasing but still relatively meagre. There are few, if any, alternative spaces and artist-run initiatives. Incredibly Milan still lacks an efficient and active museum of contemporary art, despite much discussion. The space that now serves this purpose, the PAC (a small pavilion constructed in the 1950s by Ignazio Gardella), is a beautiful but dated building, poorly managed by a timorous and ill-informed public administration. One of the first actions taken by Vittorio Sgarbi, the new and histrionic City Councillor for Culture, does not offer much encouragement: he cancelled an exhibition by young artists planned for the PAC. Another test of his attitude was a recent interview in the weekly magazine *L'Espresso*, where he savaged Bonami, Cattelan and the whole contemporary art world.

Hence in Milan the biggest and practically only points of reference for practising artists are the commercial spaces, which obviously influence, for better or worse, artistic production. After the wave of galleries that opened in the late 1980s (Galleria Massimo de Carlo, Emi Fontana, Studio Guenzani, Gió Marconi), there has been another spate of gallery openings in the last few years. Galleria Francesca Kaufmann, Massimo Minini and especially Zero work with an interesting group of Italian artists. Minini is among those who has followed Zero and De Carlo and opened an exhibition space in Via Ventura, in the north of the city, which since 2001 has become the venue for a number of architectural studios, magazines such as *Abitare* and design academies as well as private homes. The area has changed almost overnight and is attracting increasing numbers of visitors. Someone has dubbed it the 'Italian Chelsea'.

In Turin – with its noble tradition, sophisticated, a bit snobbish – the relationship between private

and public seems more efficient and relaxed. In Turin it means, above all, up-to-date and intelligent private galleries, either long-established (Franco Noero, for instance) or recent arrivals (Sonia Rosso). At an institutional level the most important space is the Castello di Rivoli museum, which opened in 1984 (initially funded by the regional government, it has also been subsidized more recently by private money from Fondazione GFT). Set on a hill just outside Turin, within a restructured grand Baroque residence, it's like a detached but still attractive old lady. With its proudly elegant profile, at times a little dusty but always rigorous, Rivoli is still today, in spite of growing competition,<sup>1</sup> the most important museum for contemporary art in Italy.

Turin gives the impression of being a city in the throes of a process of marked urban and social transformation, with a cultural diversity beyond that offered by Milan. In the visual arts this takes the form a good art fair (Artissima), a series of public commissions and a large number of museums and institutions, some of which are privately funded (but with public support). Among these are spaces that reflect the dynamic and modernized side of Turin: the new Fondazione Merz and more established Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, the Artistic Director of which is Francesco Bonami. With a heterogeneous collection that is in step with the times, Rebaudengo supports many younger artists, a large proportion of whom are Italian (it has put on major solo shows by Arienti, Diego Perrone and Tuttofuoco in the last two years).

As Dante wrote, 'Eppur si muove' ('and yet it moves'): there is still much to be done, but if the Italian art world continues the current trend of renewal and modernization, the future could be bright indeed. And not only for individual achievements: from Arte Povera to the World Cup history tells us that teamwork often achieves more than individual effort.

<sup>1</sup> Recent years have seen the creation of numerous centres and museums of contemporary art scattered throughout Italy. Some of these (such as the MACRO and the MAXXI in Rome, and MAMBO in Bologna) are still under construction.

Massimiliano Gioni

Artistic Director of the Trussardi Foundation in Milan. In 2006 he curated the 4th Berlin Biennial with Maurizio Cattelan and Ali Subotnick.

By a strange quirk of fate I find myself writing about Milan while actually in Melbourne, Australia. The two cities have just initiated a series of exchanges, but when it comes to contemporary art it seems as though Milan can only learn from its newly acquired sister city. Melbourne has everything that Milan lacks: a museum and a centre for contemporary art, a studio building with a residency programme for emerging artists, a widely spread network of artist-run spaces, a city-run series of commissions for public art, even a television museum. While visiting the National Gallery of Victoria, I stumble across the work of three Italian artists: one painting by Lucio Fontana and two large pieces by, respectively, Mimmo Paladino and Enzo Cucchi, flatteringly displayed next to a Gerhard Richter, an Andy Warhol and a Mark Rothko. Where can I find anything like this in Milan? The answer is easy: nowhere. And this is not an exaggeration. There is really no collection of contemporary art in Milan that's open to the public, and no museum. The only public art space, PAC, a sort of Kunsthalle, remains in a state of perennial indecision that affects its programme and funding.

Milan is still home to the largest number of living artists in Italy, and to dozens of galleries and some of the most influential international players in contemporary art, but the art community always seems limited to a restricted circuit somehow unable to penetrate culture at large. So at first glance the city appears pretty much a cultural desert. It's a peculiar form of immobile dynamism, a condition – probably only possible in Italy – in which things seem to move forward but remain

completely static. Every now and then the city administration announces some new plan or a new initiative, a vast area that is to be redesigned or a radical architectural intervention that will completely transform the way we think of our space – Milan is the city of fashion and advertising: it knows how to spin its stories. But, in spite of the many triumphalist announcements suggesting an ever-changing metropolis, it remains probably the only city in Europe that has not managed to erect a new architectural icon in the past 45 years.

The same can be said about the creation of a new museum. The realization of a new space for the city's collection of Italian art of the early 20th century has been discussed for many years now. The plans and design for its interiors have been diligently completed, but construction has not yet started, and many believe it never will. One would be happy to give those involved the benefit of the doubt, were it not for the fact that the same thing happened with the much-heralded museum of contemporary art, which was meant to be part of the redevelopment of a large industrial area on the outskirts of the city but was instead cancelled because of pollution problems and lack of funding.

We could keep on complaining, if it weren't that this game has already exhausted much of the Milanese art world. In fact, we all know not to expect anything from the city administration. If Milan does still have a lively art scene, it is only thanks to the enthusiasm of a few private initiatives. Galleries have played an important role in importing, exporting and exhibiting new and old talents. Artists, collectors, critics, curators and fans keep travelling to major art destinations in Italy and abroad. And private foundations such as Hangar Bicocca, Prada, Pomodoro and Trussardi have taken over the role of museums, while the Triennale, mostly a design and architecture showcase, has started putting on fairly populist art exhibitions. Obviously private initiatives have set very peculiar standards and formats. For example, the complete absence of artist-run initiatives can be read as the result of a system largely based on corporate sponsorship and conspicuous shows of wealth, which have restricted the possibilities for smaller and more independent operations.

But let's go back to our initial question: where to find the best art of the last 50 or so years in Milan? Where to see not a Warhol, a Richter or Rothko – pleasures that seem not to be allowed in the Calvinist Milan – but, more simply, a couple of paintings by Fontana and Piero Manzoni? Fontana and Manzoni are particularly significant examples, not only because they are probably the two most famous Italian artists of the 1950s and '60s but also because they lived and worked in Milan back in the days when it was still possible to imagine the future and to have a strong impact on the present.

Alas, today there is almost no trace left of our two heroes. And one has to be not just a committed art lover but also a master sleuth to be able to find the somewhat marginal, semi-private Boschi Foundation, a small collection in an apartment in a tiny street just off Corso Buenos Aires, where Fontana hangs next to Manzoni's 'Achromes' amid works by the so-called Spazialisti and other Informel painters of the 1950s. Still preserving the atmosphere of a bourgeois 1940s' home, with a crowded salon hanging and a very diverse sense of quality, for better and for worse the Boschi Foundation is probably the perfect emblem of contemporary art in Milan.

In a city that is mostly known for its streamlined elegance, contemporary art has paradoxically become a retreat, a refuge. It's an escape from, rather than an immersion in, the present. It's a game of pretend that is often played out in living-rooms and private apartments, while the real business is left to other fields such as design and fashion. Perhaps it's a matter of modesty or jealousy, but contemporary art in Milan has always had the somewhat limited horizons of chamber music, very seldom acquiring the symphonic grandeur that could stretch out and invade the public realm. It's certainly no coincidence that the most rebellious art movement to have come out of Milan – the fury of the Futurists – was actually conceived inside Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's house. Even the most raucous of the Futurists actually lounged around on Persian carpets amid Egyptian artefacts, sitting on comfortable couches in carefully studied dandy poses. Their anger simmered amid the muffled

atmosphere of a claustrophobic home.

The same may still be true today. And today there are still two great things about growing up in a closed environment: the first, of course, is that you may be forced to travel on the wings of your own imagination, dreaming up alternatives and new, possible worlds; the second – more simply, and more aggressively – is that you just want to get out. Maybe that's what Milan is there for.

Luca Cerizza and Massimiliano Gioni

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