

With galleries and museums proliferating, the formerly conservative Italian capital is basking in its new role as a contemporary art center. By Jonathan Turner

## Rome's Recent Renaissance

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BEST KNOWN FOR ITS ANTIQUITIES AND RUINS, Rome is experiencing a boom in contemporary art, and the emerging scene is so fresh that most of it has not yet made it into the guidebooks. The Eternal City is being reborn as a vibrant cultural center with the clout to attract big-name artists, architects, dealers and collectors. For instance, Maxxi, a vast museum of 21st-century art designed by Zaha Hadid within the shell of a former army barracks, is currently nearing completion, and next April a new major art fair will open at Palazzo Venezia and at Trajan's Forum, linking 100 international contemporary galleries to Rome's ancient monuments.

The gallery scene is thriving, too, and a spate of sellout shows holds the promise that Rome will fast become a market force to rival Milan. In May 2004 Raul Marinuzzi Ronconi inaugurated Next Door Gallery with the first Roman solo show of Massimo Vitali's outsize photographs of summer vacation scenes. "After training at the Sotheby's Institute in London," says Ronconi, "I realized that there was an opportunity to be seized in my native Rome, a city that seemed to have been lagging behind since the Baroque. It was a challenge both economically and culturally." By staging slick shows of both local and international artists, the gallery has quickly won local fans and gained a reputation for excellence. "It's about instructing a formerly sleepy town, choosing artists who need to be shown and showing them in a 21st-century, state-of-the-art gallery tucked inside a 17th-century palazzo," he says.

In response to the growing potential of Rome, galleries from elsewhere in Italy—

like Antonio Battaglia of Milan, the LipanjePuntin Gallery of Trieste, Trisorio of Naples and Brancolini Grimaldi of Florence—have opened satellite shops in the capital. "As a contemporary gallery, it's important to continually change your objectives," says Cristina Lipanje, codirector of LipanjePuntin, which inaugurated its new space last year with sound sculptures by the composer Andrea Cera. "After a decade based in northern Italy, we saw that Rome offered us unexpected possibilities and a great chance for experimentation. The sudden spurt in the growth of contemporary museums and the expansion of public interest have not happened in other parts of the country. Plus we wanted to confront a new reality, a scene that appears more important, more open."

This year in his new space near the Tiber in Trastevere—a bustling villagelike neighborhood known for its colorful festivals—former Anthony d'Offay director Lorcan O'Neill staged sellout shows of landscapes by Anselm Kiefer and the androgynous self-portraits of Francesco Clemente. New works by Tracey Emin were on view in the fall. Several established Roman galleries, including Ugo Ferranti and Pio Monti near Piazza Navona and S.A.L.E.S. near the markets at Piazza Vittorio, have moved into bigger and brighter quarters in the past year. The sisters Alessandra and Valentina Bonomo, who until 2002 worked together in a single space in Trastevere, have now doubled their force by establishing two separate galleries in the ancient center of the city. This past summer Alessandra had an impressive show of watercolors, drawings and bronzes of supermodel Kate Moss by British artist Marc Quinn. >>



Above: Mercati di Traiano will be offering Olivo Barbieri's *Site Specific Roma*, 2004, at this Spring's FotoGrafia Festival. Left: *Shadow-The Girls*, 2006, by Maree Azzopardi, who is represented by Rome's largest gallery, Il Ponte contemporanea.

# LETTER FROM ROME

Valentina's inaugural show in April 2002 in the heart of the former Jewish ghetto featured paintings and sculptures by Mimmo Paladino that evoke Italy's ancient past.

The biggest private gallery in Rome is the expanded Il Ponte Contemporanea, a space that has become a microcosm of the new Roman art scene, where staff work closely with museums, curators, collectors, and both emerging and established artists. With room for several solo shows to run simultaneously, the gallery's broad, vaulted space accommodates a wide range of talent—Roman artist Maurizio Mochetti's sculptures and laser installations inspired by the concepts of velocity, flight and motorcar speedways; surreal explorations of the beauty myth by the Amsterdam-based photographer Fritz Kok; Roman artist Matteo Basile's expressive faces peering from lightboxes scratched with graffiti; and post-Revolutionary sculptures by the Gao Brothers of China. The Gao Brothers and Basile are on view in the gallery until mid-November.

"One of the attractions of Rome is that it always remains true to itself," says Giuliano Matricardi, director of Il Ponte Contemporanea, which has been a trailblazer of the art scene. In business for 13 years but at its current, larger venue since 2005, the gallery occupies a series of vaulted rooms near the impressive Palazzo Farnese, partly designed by Michelangelo. "Rome is not a carbon copy of any other city," says Matricardi. "It is demonstrating a new quality, a remarkable ability to attract those who want to be involved in contemporary art and architecture."

While other art capitals have their biennials; Rome already has the Quadriennale, which every four years aims to summarize the most important developments in Italian art. Formerly the

Quadriennale was viewed as institutional and staid, but its past three editions have been critically acclaimed as refreshing and dynamic. In 2005 the XIV Quadriennale attracted more than 50,000 visitors. Meanwhile, each spring FotoGrafia Festival Internazionale di Roma is mounted in galleries and museums throughout the city. This year 200 photographers were featured in 120 exhibitions at 70 locations. Each September Rome hosts a citywide event called La Notte Bianca. Museums, archaeological sites and galleries open their doors to the public for free, and this year more than 2 million people roamed the streets until dawn. Then there's Riparte, marking its 12th edition this month, an informal art fair held on two floors of the hip Ripa Hotel in Trastevere. Instead of using booths, each gallery takes over a hotel room to promote its stable of artists. The event's burgeoning success confirms that an eager public is out there.

There is also a new generation of young museumgoers who consider the visual arts a vital form of entertainment on a par with movies, bars and concerts. They flocked to MACRO (Museo d'Arte Contemporanea di Roma), which opened in 2002. It is so ambitious that its collection is spread over four buildings at two sites. "Our objective in the beginning was to create an institutional center that would confront and accustom the public to contemporary art on a global level," says director Danilo Eccher.

Last year 18 young Roman collectors, including Giovanni Giuliani and Pino Calabresi, established an influential purchasing committee for the museum, called MACROAmici. Under the auspices of this association, the first donation was a piece in colored wax by

Domenico Bianchi, with other acquisitions of works by Nunzio, Gianni Piacentino and Gianni Dessi being discussed.»

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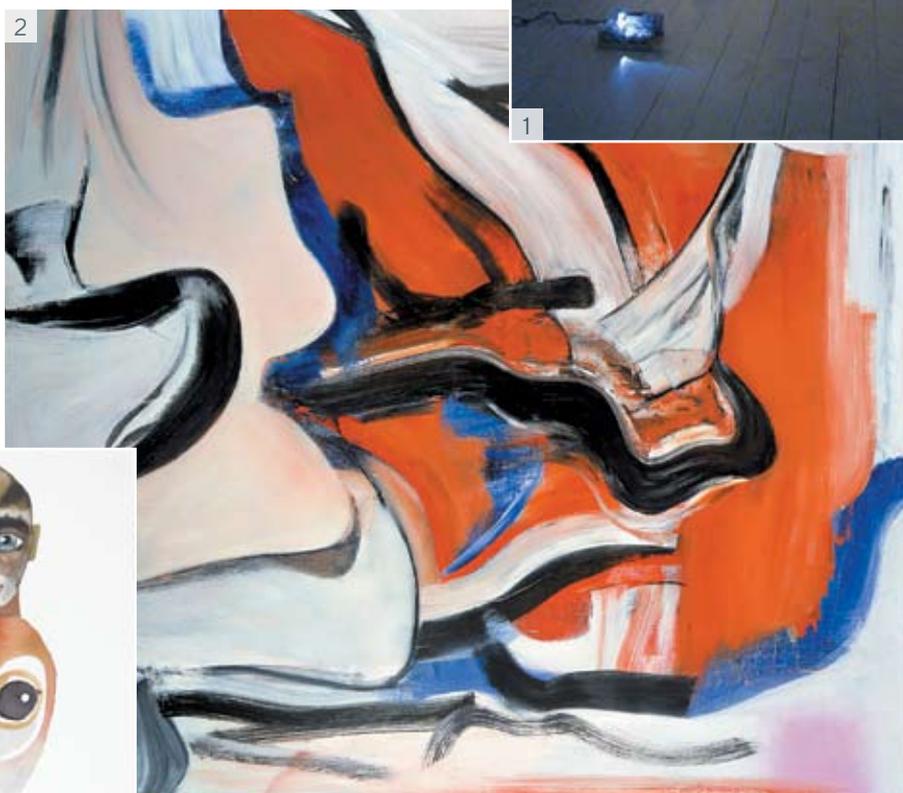


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(1) A partial view of Andrea Cera's installation *Undertones*, 2005, at the Lapanje Puntin Gallery; (2) Willem de Kooning's *Untitled IX*, 1982, currently on view at the Carlo Bilotti Museum; (3) Francesco Clemente's *Self-Portrait as an Owl*, 2005, recently on view at Lorcan O'Neill; (4) *Murderer*, 2006, by Nextdoor...art Galleria's Claudio Asquini.



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(1) LAPANJE PUNTIN ARTECONTEMPORANEA ROMA-TRIESTE; (2) © 2006 THE WILLEM DE KOONING FOUNDATION/ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY, NEW YORK; (3) GALLERIA LORCAN O'NEILL, ROME; (4) © NEXTDOOR...ARTGALLERIA, ROME, 2006

# LETTER FROM ROME

Based on the vast collection amassed over more than 30 years by an Italian-American tycoon and philanthropist, the Carlo Bilotti Museum opened in June in what was once the Villa Borghese's orangery. The modern refurbishment incorporates classical statuary and fountains. The inaugural show was centered around 18 works by Giorgio de Chirico from the 1930s to '60s that were donated to the city by Bilotti, as well as paintings that he commissioned from Damien Hirst, David Salle and Jenny Saville. "Although I spend a lot of my time abroad, I wanted a permanent home in Rome for parts of my collection, with an accent on major contemporary artists," says Bilotti. "I don't want a static museum but a dynamic project to share with the public."

It is no coincidence that so many projects are now coming to fruition. When he was mayor in the 1990s, Francesco Rutelli instigated a series of long-term cultural initiatives. For the past five years the current mayor, Walter Veltroni, has continued to fund and promote innovative institutions and art events. In an appealing example of synchronicity, Rutelli has been appointed as Italy's new culture minister, Veltroni's former job. The departure of the former prime minister Silvio Berlusconi appears to have kick-started and inspired the cultural scene, with unconventional projects and less-commercial events taking center stage.

Rome has become an authentic art hub. Such established Rome-based artists as Bianchi, Jannis Kounellis, Luigi Ontani and Vettor Pisani are now being joined by other Italian artists who are taking studios in the city, including Paladino and such notable foreigners as Marina Abramovic, Myriam Laplante and Joseph Kosuth. Along with

these international stars, the best-known artists of the younger Roman-born generation reveal the current diversity of activity in the city: the videos of Elisabetta Benassi, the free-form rubber sculptures of Paolo Canevari, the installations based on body transformations by Rocco Dubbini, the poetic realism of Andrea Fogli and the meticulous, pixellated paintings of Cristiano Pintaldi. While Fogli shows with Ugo Ferranti, Dubbini with Il Ponte Contemporanea and Canevari with Studio Stefania Miscetti, many of the younger artists do not have sole gallery representation but work on project-based exhibitions.

Most celebrated for his distorted, expressionistic paintings that were part of the Transavanguardia movement in the 1980s, Enzo Cucchi is now acting as a catalyst for Rome's emerging art scene. In a hands-on manner, he frequently goes beyond the role of the artist and into that of the curator by creating hybrid works with members of the younger generation or including their works in exhibitions in which he participates.

Cucchi, whose paintings contain a treasure trove of elongated figures, rural buildings and archaic references set in sulfur-colored landscapes, has his own visionary idea about the city's cultural renaissance. Referring to Rome's layered, sedimentary character—the ancient city at the bottom, then medieval and Renaissance Rome, and the modern city on top—Cucchi says, "A truly symbolic new institution should be subterranean, seven floors below the current city of Rome, a golden canal for contemporary art deeply embedded in its own real history. In a city with little surface space available, it's entirely possible." ■

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(5) Rome-grown art star Enzo Cucchi's *Il poeta (The Poet)*, 1996; (6) Maurizio Mochetti's *Bluebird*, 2006, at Il Ponte Contemporanea; (7) a performance sampling from *La Notte Bianca*; (8) Marc Quinn's *Kate Moss*, 2006, recently on view at Galleria Alessandra Bonomo; (9) The Gao Brothers' *A Mass in Tiananmen Square*, 1995, on view this month at Il Ponte Contemporanea.

(5) 2RC EDIZIONI D'ARTE, ROME; (6) PAOLO CIPOLLINA, COURTESY GALLERIA IL PONTE CONTEMPORANEA; (7) LA NOTTE BIANCA ROME, 2006; (8) GALLERIA ALESSANDRA BONOMO, ROME; (9) GALLERIA IL PONTE CONTEMPORANEA