

REPORT FROM NORTHERN ITALY

Art in the Maelstrom

As the country reels from political scandal to economic crisis, the private museums and galleries of northern Italy struggle to preserve the region's once lively contemporary art scene.

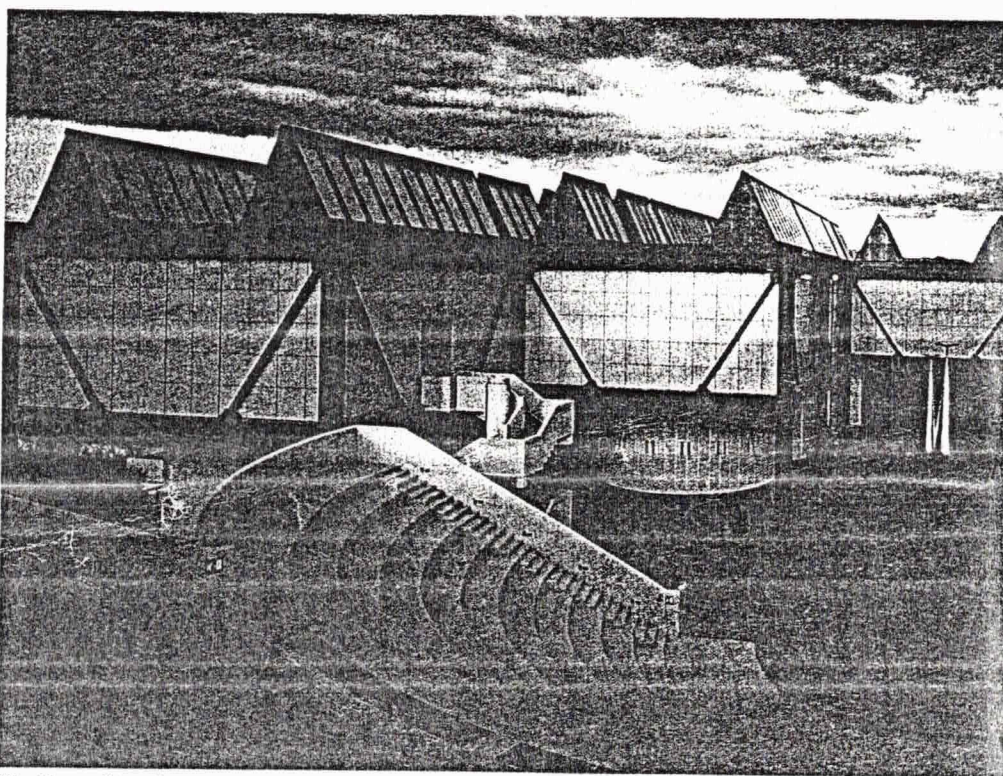
BY MEYER RAPHAEL RUBINSTEIN

"Northern Italy" is a zone about whose borders no two Italians will easily agree. Does it comprise just the regions of Lombardy, Piedmont, the Alto Adige and the Veneto? Or should one include Liguria, on the coast near Monaco, and Emilia Romagna? And what about Tuscany—surely that is not part of the south? The question is further complicated by the fact that for Italians "northernness" is determined not only by geographic but also by subtle economic and cultural distinctions. For the moment, let's provisionally adopt the idea that northern Italy extends as far south as Florence, but no farther.

As a glance at Italian history will tell you, the question of regional boundaries is not an idle one. In 1849 Metternich called Italy, which was then divided into more than a half-dozen states and duchies and whose citizens spoke in twice that many dialects, a mere "geographical expression" rather than an identifiable nation. By the mid-20th century, Italy seemed to have left its fragmented history behind. In spite of nagging economic and cultural discrepancies between north and south, its national identity and unity seemed indisputable. Today, however, Italy's very existence as a nation is being seriously questioned, bringing Metternich's once outdated witticism back into currency. And as the country struggles through its most difficult political period since the Second World War, the cultural sector has also been caught up in what many are beginning to call the "Italian revolution."

A Country in Crisis

The past 12 months have seen Italy reeling from one crisis to another. The dramatic assassinations in Sicily of two leading anti-Mafia investigators suggested that the government had effectively lost control of a whole section of the country. If this weren't bad enough, in late March Giulio Andreotti, a former prime minister who has been a continuous member of every Italian government since 1947 and who is arguably the dominant political figure of postwar Italy, announced that he was under investigation for ties to the Mafia. In the north, the victories in regional and local elections of political maverick Umberto Bossi's Lega Nord (Northern League), a party that initially advocated the separation of northern Italy from the rest of the country, raised the specter of secession. As he draws closer to real power, though, Bossi has tempered his message to calling for German- or Swiss-style federalism, with Italy divided into a small number of autonomous regions. In essence the Northern League, a largely middle-class movement, proposes to rid the prosperous north of the burden of paying taxes to support the poor, Mafia-ridden south.



The Museo d'Arte Contemporanea Luigi Pecci in Prato, as seen from its amphitheater.

In the past year the League has gotten a big boost from *Operazione Mani Pulite*—Operation Clean Hands—the sensational corruption investigation based in Milan that has now touched figures as prominent as Bettino Craxi, prime minister for most of the 1980s and head of the Socialist Party, part of the ruling coalition with the Christian Democrats. What began as an inquiry into the misdeeds of local government has now led to so many indictments against politicians, heads of public utilities and leading businessmen that public administration has practically ground to a halt. Add to this a deepening economic crisis—the Italian national debt is proportionally larger than that of the U.S., and the lira has lost more than 50 percent of its value against the dollar in recent months—plus the desperate measures being employed to bring Italy's economy into compliance with the strict guidelines of the European Community, and you have what seems like a recipe for disaster.

What has all of this meant for the contemporary Italian art world? At first glance, surprisingly little. In contrast to the rest of western Europe, the state in Italy does little to support contemporary art. According to Christian Stein, whose Turin gallery

was crucial in promoting the early Arte Povera artists, "Italy is so rich in works of the past that it has no intention of spending money to buy contemporary art or even to promote it." To understand how low on the agenda modern art is in Italy, one only has to visit Rome's Galleria Nazionale di Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, a generally deserted building with moldy ceilings and grave security problems, which has recently suffered from the theft of a Cézanne, the unexplained collapse and shattering of a sculpture by Fausto Melotti and a mysterious basement fire.¹ Things are not better in the north. In Milan, 20th-century art is relegated to a few cramped, dimly lit rooms in the Palazzo Reale, while Turin's Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna, a major force in the 1960s, has been kept closed since 1975 by local political feuding, and its extensive collection left to languish in the basement.²

Times may not be very good for public collections of modern art in Italy, but they were hardly any better before the current crisis. There is, however, some hope on the horizon in a new law governing Italy's 800 state museums, only half of which are open at present. Known as the Ronchey Law, after the minister of culture Alberto Ronchey,

In Turin, an older generation of artists such as Mario Merz and Alighiero Boetti still dominates the cultural landscape. Not much has been done to encourage potential successors.

it will allow for better organization and funding and increased autonomy for museums. Even so, these would only be preliminary measures in the battle to overcome decades of negligence.³

Private Museums for Contemporary Art

Because of this history of official neglect, the exhibition spaces that do exist for modern and contemporary art in Italy tend to be privately funded; not surprisingly, they are likely to be located in the more prosperous north. On the outskirts of Turin, the Castello di Rivoli regularly mounts retrospective exhibitions of Italian artists like Luciano Fabro and Piero Manzoni, and last year it played host to "Post Human," a traveling extravaganza of contemporary art about the body. The museum is housed in an unfinished but elegant 18th-century royal palace and is jointly funded by Fiat and the Piedmont regional government. In Turin, Fiat also funds the Lingotto, a building originally built for automobile testing and now transformed into an exhibition center. In Venice the automaker supports the Palazzo Grassi, the only Italian museum which regularly hosts blockbuster exhibitions. In April, under the aegis of Pontus Hulten, the Palazzo Grassi opened a major Duchamp exhibi-

tion. The other important museum for contemporary art, the Centro per l'arte contemporanea Luigi Pecci in Prato, outside of Florence, is supported by wealthy local patrons and by business contributions.

But while institutions like the Pecci Center and Rivoli are well funded and have generally interesting exhibition programs, they both suffer from problems of accessibility. Rivoli is located on a large hill overlooking the outskirts of Turin, with no direct public transportation from the center of the city; even traveling by car can take half an hour. The Pecci museum, a 20-minute drive from Florence, lies some distance from the nearest train station; bus service is available but connections are tricky. Thus both museums are often empty, patronized only by the traditionally small public for contemporary art. When Milan-based critic Anthony Iannacci likens them to "castles in the desert," he highlights the isolated position of modern and contemporary art in Italy.

It is precisely this isolation that the new director of the Pecci museum, former *Artforum* editor Ida Panicelli, is hoping to overcome with a program designed to involve the surrounding community. Panicelli, who arrived in Prato in November 1992, also proposes to introduce art that deals with gender, sexuality and politics, so as to counter what she sees as the over-estheticization of recent Italian art.⁴ In late March, Panicelli mounted her first show. Called "Inside Out: Museum, City, Events," it presented works by Giulio Paolini, Karen Knorr, Barbara Kruger, Tadashi Kawamata and Fabio Mauri. Responding to Panicelli's invitation, Kruger created a large image-and-text work on fabric that covered the wall of a factory along a highway near the museum. The choice of material was in response to Prato's long history as a textile center. In contrast, Kawamata employed wood-and-metal scaffolding to create a series of above-ground passageways through the historic center of Prato.

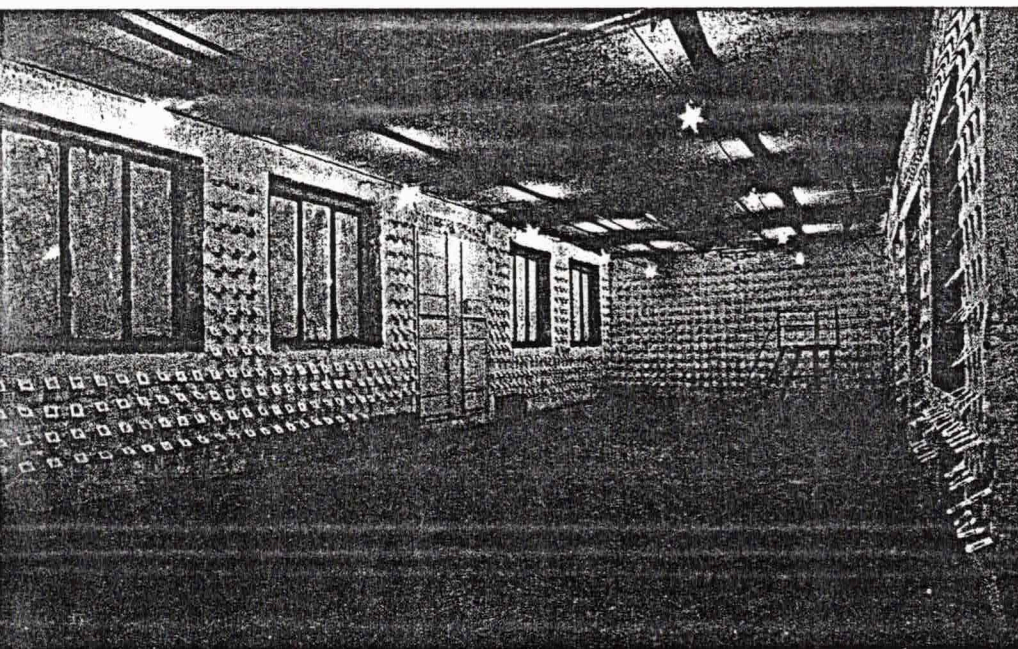
These active outdoor works were in marked contrast to the neo-classical poise of Knorr's photographs and Paolini's installations within the museum.

Apart from private ventures like the Pecci museum, there is a certain amount of regional support by local governments for temporary exhibitions. Bologna and, more recently, Bolzano have museums devoted to modern art, and since 1979 Milan's PAC (Padiglione per l'arte contemporanea), a public exhibition space located in a park in central Milan, has mounted regular shows of artists like Jannis Kounellis, Pino Pascali and Cindy Sherman as well as exhibitions devoted to fashion and design. To this list one could add spaces like the Galleria Civica in Modena and the Palazzo Martinengo in Brescia. Recently these two institutions collaborated on an impressive retrospective of the late Gastone Novelli, an Italian painter of the 1960s whose work deserves wider exposure. Working with varying shades of white paint and penciled inscriptions, Novelli created deceptively casual-looking paintings filled with graffiti-like marks at once more specific and more sensuous than those of Twombly.

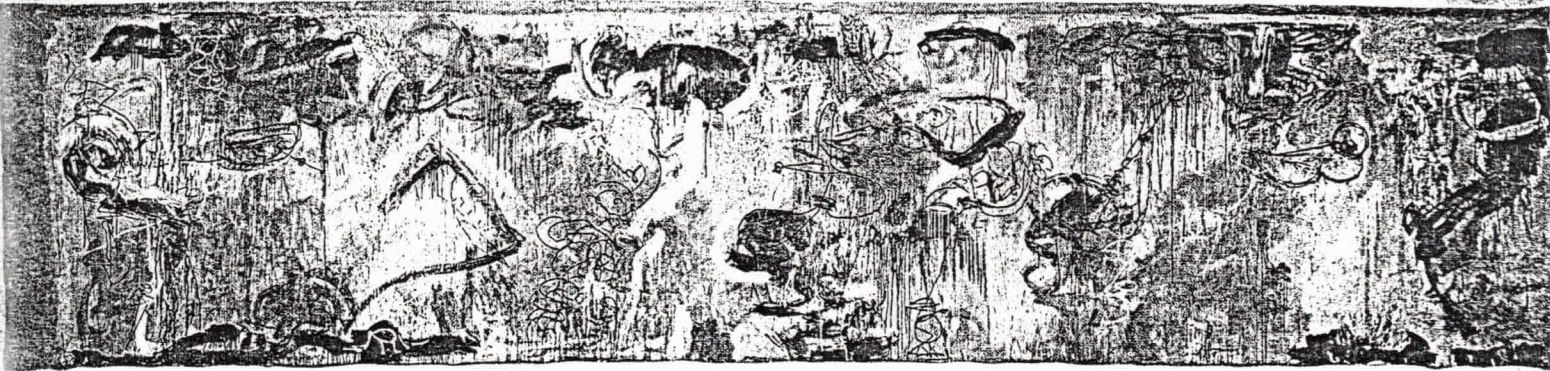
Occasionally special exhibitions will come out of nowhere, like the splendid retrospective of Giuseppe Pinot-Gallizio organized in Turin last winter by Francesco Poli in the spacious galleries of the privately owned Promotrice delle Belle Arti and sponsored by the regional Piedmont government. Pinot-Gallizio, who died in 1964, is one of the great secrets of postwar Italian art. He was a retired pharmacist who invented a machine that turned out abstract paintings by the yard; he composed massive canvases with his eyes blindfolded and assisted in the founding of the Situationist movement [see *A.I.A.*, Oct. '89]. Somewhat unexpectedly, he also turns out to have been a brilliant painter.

Turin: Living on Past Glory

Fascinating as the Novelli and Pinot-Gallizio exhibitions were, they also served as reminders that Italy remains far from creating modern-art institutions on the scale of Madrid's Reina Sofia or Amsterdam's Stedelijk. In contrast to the uneven museum situation, northern Italy is rich in commercial galleries, even if some of them are having a hard time in the present economic climate. One of the most renowned is Turin's Christian Stein Gallery, which for the past 20 years has been located in a gracious apartment overlooking the Piazza San Carlo in the center of the city. Supplemented by a more industrial-style space in Milan (and, until its recent closing, by the SteinGladstone Gallery in New York), Stein continues to concentrate on Arte Povera artists like Giulio Paolini, Luciano Fabro and Mario Merz. At the age of 71, Stein is also devoting more time to her probably unsurpassed collection of postwar Italian art, a part of which was recently shown in France in successive exhibitions at museums in Villeurbanne and Toulouse. It is perhaps no accident that Stein's collection is being shown in France rather than Italy. For several years Stein unsuccessfully attempted to donate her collection to the city of Turin, in order to create a museum where it could



Installation view of Alessandro Pessoli's *Maelstrom*, 1992; at ViaFarini, an alternative space in Milan. Photo Armin Linke.



Giuseppe Pinot-Gallizio's *The Blind Night*, 1962, (oil on canvas, approx. 7½ by 32 feet, collection Musée National d'Art Moderne) was included in his 1992 retrospective at the Promotrice delle Belle Arti, Turin.

be on permanent display. The experience has left her thoroughly disillusioned and clearly contributes to her pessimism about public support for contemporary art in Italy.

If one must describe Stein's collection as "probably" the best of the period, it's because the tax situation in Italy tends to keep collectors underground. Not only are there no tax incentives for donations to museums, but there have been cases in which a collector has loaned a work to an exhibition only to receive a subsequent visit from the tax authorities, curious as to what else the collection might contain and where the money to build it came from. Not surprisingly, such stories keep private involvement in public exhibitions to a minimum.

Quite different in style from Stein's is Tucci Russo's gallery, located in a group of former industrial buildings in a quiet corner of Turin. Russo, an early supporter of the "trans-avant-garde," likes to mount extensive shows of artists such as Tony Cragg, Daniel Buren and the imaginative younger Italian Alfredo Pirri, offering them large spaces in which to work out their ideas. In contrast is the intimate space of Giorgio Persano, who regularly shows Michelangelo Pistoletto and Franz West, among other artists. A newer gallery, In Arco (its name reflects the distinctive arched porticos of Turin as well as the gallery's own design), has recently been showing younger New York abstract painters such as Fabian Marcaccio, Lydia Dona and Nicholas Howey. The highest concentration of young Italian artists in Turin is to be found around dealer Franz Paludetto, who operates out of the picturesque Castello di Rivara—not to be confused with the Castello di Rivoli—which has been operating a kind of artists' colony/exhibition space for several years.

The strength of Turin's recent artistic past will be the subject of an exhibition at the Museo di Rivoli called "Un'avventura internazionale, Torino e le Arte 1950-1970." Curated by Germano Celant, Paolo Fossati and Ida Gianelli, the museum's director, the exhibition will review Turin's early hospitality to international developments in post-war art. The city was the Italian port-of-entry for much avant-garde art, eventually giving birth to its own avant-garde movement, *Arte Povera*. An important factor in Turin's openness was the Sperone Gallery. Founded in 1964 by Gian Enzo Sperone, who today continues to operate galleries in Rome and New York, Sperone Gallery brought Pop art,

Minimalism and Conceptual art to Turin through a series of timely exhibitions by American artists and then-emerging Italians like Michelangelo Pistoletto. Sperone also showed the *Arte Povera* artists early on.

Despite this history and the current activity of newer Turin galleries, a seasoned observer like Christian Stein doesn't see that her hometown holds much for young artists. At least for the immediate future, she sees Milan offering them more room to develop. Paradoxically, Stein's success in developing the careers of Turin-based artists like Merz, Paolini and Alighiero Boetti may be one of the reasons that the city is such a difficult place for young artists. This older generation still dominates the cultural landscape and, perhaps jealous of its power, has not done much to encourage its potential successors. One should also add that the social and economic climate of Turin, a city caught between the persistent snobbishness of its aristocratic past and the all-pervasive contemporary presence of Fiat, is far less conducive to the activities of individual artists than the rough-and-tumble capitalism of Milan. That it's not a place for the young is confirmed by the fact that even though Paludetto has established his gallery as one of the major venues for younger artists in northern Italy, nearly all of the Italian artists he shows live in Milan rather than Turin.

Milan: Young Galleries Arrive

Until recently, Milan was best known as an international center of finance and high fashion. Its new status as corruption capital of Italy—they call it *tangentopoli* (kickback city)—now threatens to replace that image, if Jane Kramer's recent article on Milan in *The New Yorker* is any indication.⁵ While the rich and powerful in Milan these days live in constant fear of an arrest warrant from the crusading judge Antonio di Pietro, the rest of the city's smog-bound inhabitants worry about who is going to pay for decades of mismanagement.

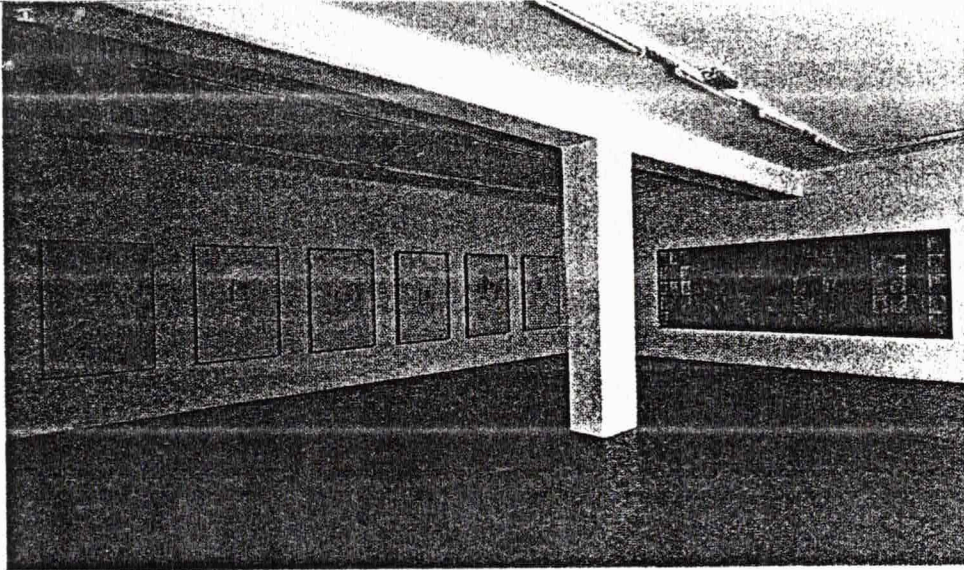
Despite the forbidding political and economic situation, a number of galleries have recently opened in Milan, augmenting a medium-voltage art scene exemplified by established galleries like Toselli, Gian Ferrari, Feno and Galleria Milano. While the programs of the new galleries vary, many happen to be run by women. Giancarla Zanucchi's gallery, Transepoca, opened its first season with

solo shows by American artists Jane Hammond and Rona Pondick; it will incorporate younger Italians like Bologna's Alessandro Pessoli into a schedule including foreign artists like Iranian-born Fariba Hajamadi, who works out of Paris and New York. Close to Transepoca, near two of Milan's three surviving canals, is Galleria Emi Fontana. With an emphasis on women artists, Fontana also opened her season with an American, Nancy Dwyer, and will be showing a rising star of Italian art, multimedia artist Liliana Moro. Across town, Monica de Cardenas shows established foreign artists like Jean-Frederic Schnyder and Thomas Struth in addition to the Italian Maurizio Arcangeli.

These new spaces are probably hoping to repeat the success of galleries such as Studio Guenzani, which has fostered the careers of younger Italian artists Stefano Arienti and Massimo Kaufmann as well as hosting New Yorkers such as Cindy Sherman and Peter Nagy and L.A.'s Lari Pittman. Arienti, like many Italian artists of his generation, works in a number of mediums. He approaches painting obliquely, as when he dabs colored Play-Doh onto a poster reproduction of a Manet, but his real interest lies in utilizing fragile materials; he engraves Styrofoam with heated metal and makes nearly invisible drawings with silicone on translucent paper. Guenzani also shows longtime New Yorker Salvatore Scarpitta, who is enjoying something of a revival in Italy with his inclusion in this year's Venice Biennale.

Another prominent younger dealer is Massimo di Carlo, who for several years mounted challenging shows in a small space on the Via Castaldi, alternating international artists such as Cady Noland with young Milanese like Mario Airo. In 1991 di Carlo opened a second, much larger space on Via Bocconi, where his program for the first half of 1993 included Matt Mullican and John Coplans, while the young Italian conceptual artist Maurizio Cattelan and American Jessica Diamond have forthcoming shows scheduled in the old space.

The strategy of exhibiting both attention-getting international artists and lesser-known young Italians is a smart one, but the danger is that the traffic is too often one-way. Hot young artists from New York or Cologne get shows in Milan, but their Milanese counterparts rarely receive similar invitations from abroad. It is here, perhaps, that Italy suffers most from its lack of governmental support for contemporary art. While Great Britain, France, Germany and Spain allocate funds for the interna-



Installation view of Alfredo Pirri's *For Us, 1992*; at the Galleria Tucci Russo, Turin. Photo Enzo Ricci.

Milan's galleries often show both hot young international artists and up-and-coming Italians. But the traffic is mostly one-way, with the Italians rarely getting similar invitations from abroad.

Mudima had to struggle for years to win the right from the local authorities to open its exhibition space. Founder di Maggio, a long-time supporter of Fluxus artists, wanted to be able to give artists a chance "to do a show at least once without thinking of the market."

tional promotion of their artists, the young Italian artist is left adrift. And there has been no individual critic/promoter to do for younger Italian artists what Achille Bonito Oliva did for the "trans-avant-garde" in the early '80s.

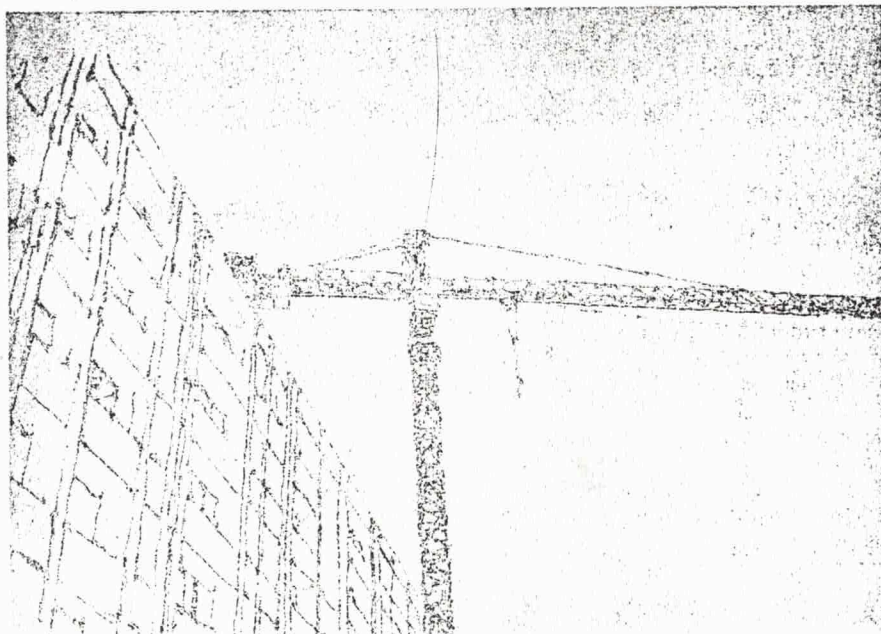
While di Carlo and Guenzani are the most prominent, there are a number of other galleries in Milan that show the younger generation, including Casoli (which occupies Lucio Fontana's old studio space), Valeria Belvedere, Paolo Vitolo and the Bordone Gallery. For several days in early 1993 Bordone became an isolation chamber where visitors could observe (through a two-way mirror) Milan artist Luca Quartana's round-the-clock 72-hour performance. As he carried out mundane activities—eating, sleeping, staring into space—Quartana attempted to communicate something of his state of mind to his invisible audience by using various types of audio and video devices.

Since its founding in the 1960s, Marconi has been one of the most prominent galleries in Milan, successfully promoting a generation of European artists that includes Valerio Adami, Richard Hamilton, Mimmo Rotella and Enrico Baj. In recent years, founder Giorgio Marconi has passed the reins to his son Gio, who has sought to bring in new energy with shows of irreverent young neo-conceptual artists from England, France and Italy. He has also given large exhibitions to young painters like the Italian abstractionist Alberto Garutti. For the moment, however, reflecting the uncertain situation in Italy, Marconi is concentrating on its established stable.

Lamenting the failure of Milan to nurture its own modern museum, Gio Marconi says that it often falls on the galleries to "make culture, because the city isn't able to." Marconi is now occasionally collaborating with the Fondazione Mudima, a four-story space just down the street, on large-scale shows like the recent display of paintings by the unlikely team of Enrico Baj and Mark Kostabi. Since its opening in 1989, the Fondazione Mudima, run by former publisher Gino di Maggio, has used its generous space for extensive shows of artists like Nam June Paik, Yoko Ono, Daniel Spoerri, Allan Kaprow and Wolf Vostell, who in 1989 installed a permanent swimming pool in the basement of the foundation. Although initially constituted in 1980,



Above, Luca Vitone: *Atopical Map, 1988-92*, mixed mediums, 32½ by 48 inches. Courtesy Galleria Paolo Vitolo, Milan.
Below, Stefano Arienti: *Untitled, 1992*, silicone on paper, 29½ by 39½ inches. Courtesy Studio Guenzani, Milan.



The privately funded foundation, the first of its kind in Italy, relies on a group of contributing members as well as corporate sponsors for specific exhibitions. But the idea of private as opposed to government support for such projects has yet to take root in Italy. Combined with the current political chaos, this makes for difficulties. For instance, after much preparation, two planned exhibitions, one of early Rauschenberg, the other a multidisciplinary show on Milan in the 1950s, never materialized. With the Milan show di Maggio had hoped to remind the public that the city had once been the cultural capital of Italy. Milan's heyday will be recalled instead by a forthcoming show on the activities of Arturo Schwartz—dealer, impresario, scholar, friend of Duchamp and Man Ray and self-appointed archivist to the Surrealists.

Milan also boasts two active alternative spaces. ViaFarini and Care/of, both of which concentrate on exhibiting young artists. Patrizia Brusarosco, who founded ViaFarini in 1991, admits that hers is "a utopian project within the reality of the Italian art system." In a notable installation last year, some thousand drawings by 29-year-old Alessandro Pessoli explicitly challenged the esthetic status quo in Italy by addressing specific social and political problems like the Mafia. In the traditionally discreet atmosphere of Milan, the enthusiasm and dedication of figures like Brusarosco—as well as Zefferina Castoldi and Mario Gorni, who jointly run Care/of—will be vital if the city's art world hopes to weather the current malaise.

From Brescia to Bolzano: A Dispersed Gallery Scene

While unable to compete in quantity with Turin or Milan, several smaller northern Italian cities are able to support one or more interesting galleries. In Brescia, for instance, Massimo Minini consistently mounts important shows by artists of the caliber of Sol LeWitt and Ettore Spalletti, as well as featuring young Italians like Paula Pezzi, whose wall sculptures of simulated stone wrapped in colored cloth seem like relics of some primitive religion. In nearby Verona, the long-established Studio la Città has recently shown Richard Tuttle and Lynn Davis as well as younger artists like painters Robert Feintuch and Luigi Carboni. Bologna, renowned for the efficiency of its Communist-run city government, boasts a few galleries in addition to the Galleria Comunale d'Arte Moderna. Bologna is also the annual site of Arte Fiere, long Italy's most important art fair.

Since 1980 the city of Genoa has supported a major gallery, Locus Solus, which shows a wide range of artists including John Baldessari, Maurizio Mochetti, Richard Deacon and Jan Vercrusse. For younger artists, Genoa's Galleria Pinta is an important presence. Down the coast, in the small port of Livorno, Galleria Peccalo is currently concentrating on long-established American artists like George Sugarman and Norman Bluhm.

Bolzano, in the largely German-speaking section of Italy near the Austrian border, boasts the publicly and privately funded Museo d'Arte Moderna Museion, which since 1987 has mounted thematic exhibitions (such as an homage to Ezra Pound)

and a Fluxus survey curated by an American long based in Italy, the critic-translator Henry Martin.

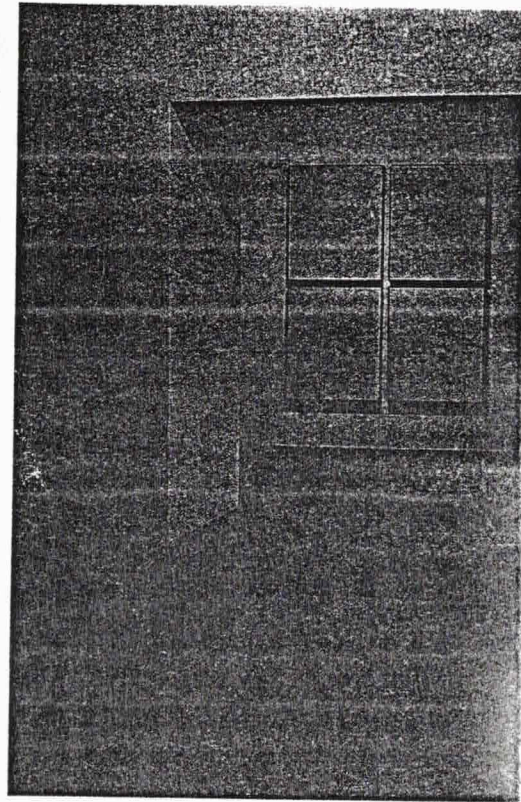
In response to the difficulties that plague institutional art activity in Italy, critic Giacinto di Pietrantonio has recently launched a novel project. *Territorio Italiano* involves some 30 artists who have been invited to select a site somewhere in Italy and propose a work of art for permanent installation there. The results range from Thomas Schutte's proposal for a museum in memory of Pier Paolo Pasolini—to be located in Ostia, in a 16-century tower near the place where the filmmaker was killed—to the tiny sculptures that Enzo Cucchi plans to hide in ancient Roman ruins. Swiss artist John Armleder intends to install a cylindrical sculpture in the riverbed of the Po, where it will be visible only during the summer. While one or two of the proposals are clearly hypothetical—two eccentric Russian artists want to slap the Pope with dead fish—the majority are already on their way to completion, with different sponsors for each work. Cannily mixing art-tourism with esthetics, di Pietrantonio's project seems an authentically Italian one.

Where To Now?

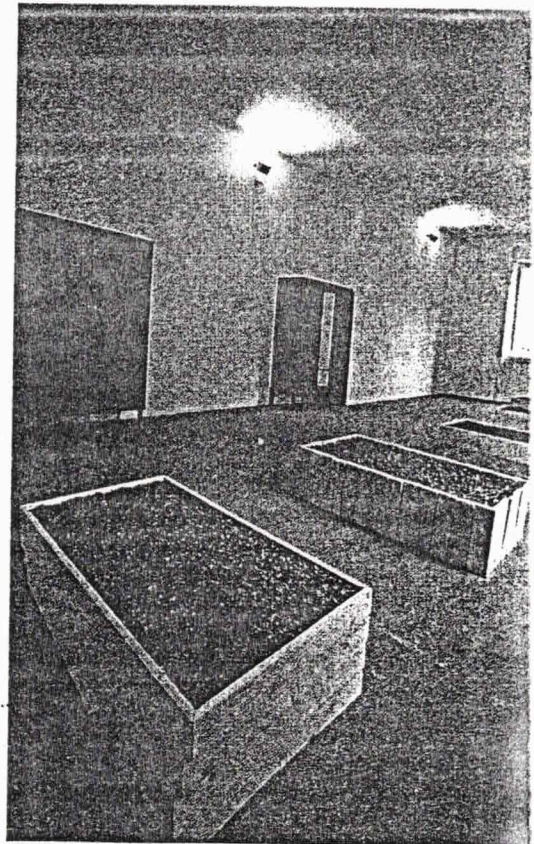
If the Italian state does little to support contemporary art, this does not mean that the political parties are not indirectly involved in the art scene. Under Italy's notorious system of *lottizzazione*, which translates roughly as "apportionment," everything from the staffing of the three state-run television channels to (allegedly) the makeup of symphony orchestras is part of the patronage system administered by the dominant political parties. Inevitably certain artists, galleries and critics profit handsomely from public commissions obtained via political connections.

Nonetheless, in the absence of established institutions dealing with contemporary art, there is much scope in Italy for individuals to wield considerable power. Prominent figures in this regard are Achille Bonito Oliva, who is currently the visual-art director of the 1993 Venice Biennale, and Giancarlo Politi and Helena Kontova, husband-and-wife publishers of *Flash Art* magazine. (Kontova is one of the curators of the Aperto section of this year's Biennale.) Although his job as curator at the Guggenheim Museum in New York keeps him out of the country, Germano Celant still exercises considerable influence on the Italian scene, not least through his ability to introduce artists like Ettore Spalletti in U.S. exhibitions.

Before the current crisis, one of the most flamboyant individuals in Italy was politician Gianni de Michelis, whose passion for nightlife is such that he once wrote a guide to the country's best discotheques. This former foreign minister and vice president of the Socialist Party is also an active supporter of contemporary art and a member of the Guggenheim Museum's board of trustees. Now, however, like many of his fellow Socialists, de Michelis is under a cloud, as investigations have linked him to the ever-widening government bribery scandal. It is in de Michelis's former fiefdom, Venice, that the Guggenheim Museum is currently expanding from its longtime base in the Peggy



Alberto Garutti's 1992 installation at the Galleria Gio Marconi, Milan.



Carlo Ferraris's 1992 installation at Valeria Belvedere, Milan. Photo Giovanni Ricci.

Recent Italian art has seemed barely to notice the chaos of the society around it. Wary of the Byzantine web of Italian politics, artists seek to maintain their own "clean hands."

Guggenheim villa on the Grand Canal. The museum has leased an adjacent villa, which after a million-dollar renovation will be able to take over some of the functions associated with the Peggy Guggenheim Collection. Guggenheim director Thomas Krens is happy to have won permission to carry out the renovations—Venice is notoriously strict about such matters—and says that the expansion will "take some of the pressure off" the original building. Major difficulties have arisen, though, with the Guggenheim's other Italian project, the proposed transformation into a museum of the villa of Count Panza de Biumo in Varese, near the Swiss border [see "Front Page"].

With the apparent demise of the old power structure, dominated by the Christian Democrats and Socialists, in which political figures like de Michelis exercised great influence on cultural affairs, no one is quite certain how to proceed, and the prospect of victories by the Northern League in upcoming local elections in Milan and elsewhere only increases the uncertainty. Given the state of the economy, Milan dealer Claudio Guenzani expects a hard time for Italian galleries and artists in the coming years, but he also believes that the changes currently being enacted—these include electoral reform, privatizations and elimination of kickbacks for publicly funded construction projects—may make possible a more open and honest way of doing business. "The old way is finished," he says bluntly. Less optimistic, Christian Stein says that before even thinking about contemporary art, "we have to put the finances of our country in order."

The struggle between the old and the new is already visible in the polemics surrounding the makeup of the new advisory board for the Venice Biennale. Immediately after the appointees were announced in January, there was a storm of newspaper editorials denouncing the fact that the board members owed their selection to the old *lottizzazione* system rather than to any expertise or achievement in the realm of culture.⁶ Three board members resigned. Art historian Federico Zeri expressed the indignation of many when he observed that those responsible for choosing the board must have been "living on the moon" not to realize that "Italy is changing." In any case, Zeri added, the Biennale itself is "a relic from an era that no longer exists."

As Italy proceeds through this extremely difficult period of transformation, it will be interesting to see if Italian artists feel compelled to respond to the country's troubles. Recent Italian art, in marked contrast to that in the U.S., has

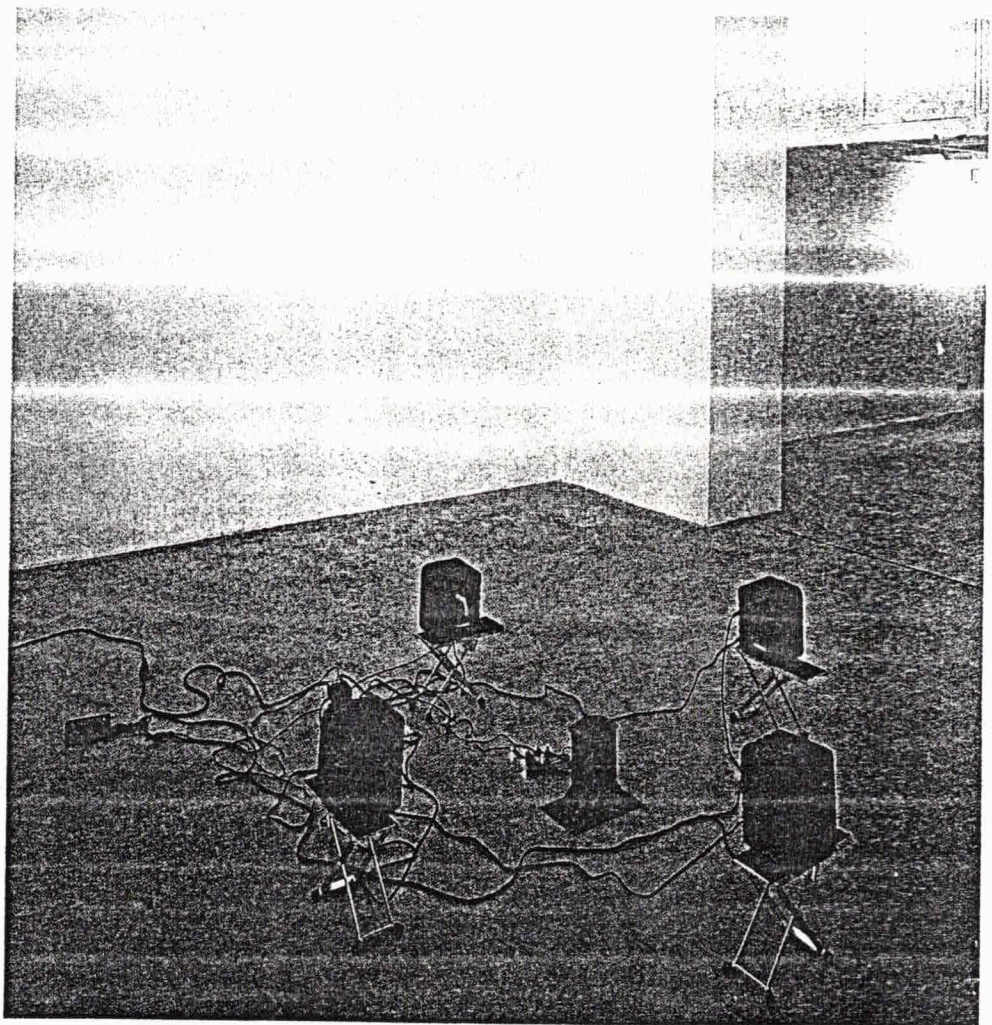
seemed barely to notice the society around it. Particularly in the north, contemporary art involves an often chilly blend of conceptualism and formalism that seems light years away from the chaos of the surrounding society. Is it the memory of the alliance between the Futurists and the Fascist Party that makes artists shy away from social commentary? Or is it simply that artists are understandably wary of entanglement in the Byzantine web of Italian politics, and regard socially disengaged work as a way to maintain their own "clean hands"?

Although much recent Italian art is notable for its silence about the state of the nation, two recent works by young Milan artists seem to acknowledge, if obliquely, the current crisis. At Galleria Paolo Vitolo, Luca Vitone presented *Atopical Map* both as a folded map and as a print measuring 32½ by 48 inches. In this piece, Vitone has erased all the names from a scale map of a section of Italy—he is careful not to say which part—and carefully reworked the lines of the map so that the missing names initially go unnoticed. Another artist, Carlo Ferraris, recently presented an installation in which he blocked off the entranceway of Valeria Belvedere Gallery with two old armoires, cutting out the back of each so that you could step through their doors into a room that contained five coffin-

like boxes filled with black confetti. Once you closed the doors of the shoddy armoire behind you, you found yourself in a room with no visible sign of how you had entered it—an unexpected and disturbing sensation. Claustrophobic and funereal, Ferraris's installation captures the way that Italy must feel to the old power elite currently on its way out, while Vitone's cryptic, nameless map suggests a country wanting nothing so much, right now, as to start over from scratch. □

1. "Un incendio nel museo dannato," *La Repubblica*, Jan. 5, 1993.
2. See Catherine Francblin, "L'aventure artistique de Madame Christian Stein," in *La Collection Christian Stein: un regard sur l'art italien*, Villeurbanne, Le Nouveau Musée, 1992.
3. See Antonio Cederna, "Miracolo, risorgono i nostri musì," *La Repubblica*, Jan. 12, 1993.
4. See Paolo Vagheggi, "Siamo esteti delle belle forme," *La Repubblica*, Jan. 19, 1993.
5. Jane Kramer, "Letter From Europe," *The New Yorker*, Sept. 21, 1992.
6. See "Biennale: Dimissioni!" *Corriere della Sera*, Jan. 11, 1993; "La Fenice, direttore per autonominà," *La Repubblica*, Jan. 12, 1993; and Simone Fiori, "Sottobosco in Laguna, che vergogna," *La Repubblica*, Jan. 12, 1993.

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Liliana Moro: No One, 1993, mixed medium installation with the artist's voice. Courtesy Galleria Emi Fontana, Milan. Photo Roberto Marossi.