



AN INTERVIEW WITH MASSIMILIANO GIONI

Natalie King

Natalie King: In 2002 you set up The Wrong Gallery in New York with co-curators Maurizio Cattelan and Ali Subotnick. As the smallest exhibition space in the gallery district of Chelsea, it made a statement about do-it-yourself structures that ignore the prevailing marketplace. Operating like a mini-Kunsthalles, some say The Wrong Gallery is the back door to contemporary art and it's always locked. Can you elaborate on the programming and philosophy of The Wrong Gallery and its more recent incarnations at Frieze Art Fair and the Tate Modern?

Massimiliano Gioni: Actually The Wrong Gallery was not born with a specific statement in mind. We just wanted to have a space and a voice; we felt everybody in New York had a place or the money to say what they wanted, and we felt we needed to participate in this discussion. So we went out looking for a space that was small enough and easy enough to be run with no money at all, and possibly with very little energy. That's how the idea of a door – always locked, with very little space behind – made perfect sense to us. We just really tried to make a virtue out of necessity, it wasn't a space that was born with a precise manifesto or a specific claim. It was more a space to keep trying things out and finding our own voice, our own style. So it did end up making a statement about real estate and property and money in New York, but that was almost accidental, or secondary, it was the side-effect of a space that was absurd, ironic and crazy enough to try, and where we could do things a little differently and still pretend to be just like all the others.

Obviously all the activities we carried out with The Wrong Gallery have something in common: there is a certain aggressiveness or a certain media-friendly style that comes with it. But again, it's not so much about creating a strategy; it's more about using tools that are efficient and that allow you to maximise your little efforts. For example, we thought that since we never had money for catalogues or publication, the press had to become our catalogue. And because we never could have afforded to win on the same field that other larger organisations were playing on, we had to invent our own method for doing things. We had to delineate our own territory of action, which often meant simply doing what other people were not doing.

opposite

Maurizio Cattelan, Untitled, 2004, mixed media installation. Photograph Attilio Maranzano, courtesy Fondazione Nicola Trussardi, Milan.

Massimiliano Gioni, Ali Subotnick, Maurizio Cattelan, Photograph Shirana Shahbazi, courtesy 4th Berlin Biennial for Contemporary Art, 2006.



left to right
Pawel Althamer, mixed-media performance
action at The Wrong Gallery, 8–29 April
2003, courtesy the artist and Foksal Gallery
Foundation, Warszawa

Paola Pivi, *Interesting*, 2006, white animals;
in the background: Paola Pivi, *Untitled*
(airplane), 1999, Fiat C81 airplane, 600 x 300 x
1185 cm, Collection Edoardo Ghezzi, Milan.
Restored with the contribution of Fondazione
Nicola Trussardi, Milan, and Galleria Massimo De
Carli, Milan. Courtesy Fondazione Nicola
Trussardi, Milan, and Galerie Emmanuel Perrotin,
Paris; Photograph: Marco De Scalz.



For example, when Amanda Sharp and Matthew Slotover invited us to take part in the [2003] Frieze Art Fair – which by the way proves how crazy they must be – we felt we needed to do something that nobody was doing at art fairs.

That's how the idea of an empty booth with nothing for sale started and that's how we decided to work with Tino Sehgal for the first time, presenting a new piece in which two children acted out a sort of parody of dealers' behaviour. We thought it was a great piece, but we also thought it was a way to ask ourselves and the public: 'What are we doing here? What are you looking for in this place?'

Maybe that's another thing that keeps many of the activities of The Wrong Gallery together: it's a tendency to question its own role, maybe even just by laughing at ourselves, and wondering what it really means to be a gallery or a small institution.

NK: Do you think you have been co-opted by the gargantuan art market, or is this a continuation of your clandestine interventions?

MG: Well, there is no appropriation by the art market because the gallery continues to be out of it. We don't buy or sell; in that sense it is still completely free. The gallery has always been about us and the many friends and generous artists who put their time into it, for no money whatsoever. Then again, we have been criticised for being complicit in a publicity oriented idea of art, which to some people is even more evil than the market itself. Some claim that in the end the gallery is just a machine for promoting some names; it's just like a logo. Personally, I don't think of it as a publicity stunt, as we really used it as a place to get to know and learn more about artists about whom we care a lot. But, then again, there is nothing wrong with creating your own logos and your own distribution system. If there is only one clear statement that underlies all the activities of The Wrong Gallery, it is that you can always invent your own space,

if you find that other spaces don't give you enough room. The Wrong Gallery might be a logo, but at least it's a logo that belongs to us and to all the people that were involved in it. It's nothing we were told to buy or use or accept.

NK: How have the renegade publications *Charley* and the *Wrong Times* supported your curatorial endeavours?

MG: *Charley* and the *Wrong Times* share this idea that they are not so much about my opinion or about the opinion of Maurizio and Ali; they are spaces that other people are invited to fill with their content. *Charley* and the *Wrong Times* are about letting other people talk. They are about being possessed by other voices. The *Wrong Times* is almost literal in this effort, as it is composed basically only of artists' voices and interviews; it's a way to keep the artists and their ideas at the centre of the debate. *Charley*, instead, is a stranger creature, which changes shape and format every time. Each issue is devoted to a different topic or created with a different method. What all the issues share is the fact that they are built by recycling and appropriating existing materials. We always thought there is a great power in editing, in selecting and cutting and pasting information. To a certain extent it's about ecology; it's about questioning this anxiety the art world has for new names, new people. *Charley* is always about reorganising things that are there, things that are not new, things that are known, but that can look interesting and fascinating the moment you rearrange them and create new connections. You should never start with the good old things, but always with the bad old things. I think somebody said,

NK: Apart from your work with The Wrong Gallery you have been Artistic Director at Trussardi Foundation since 2003 – a temporary public art commissioning agency based in Milan. How does the Trussardi Foundation



differ from other contemporary art organisations such as the Prada Foundation? What kinds of projects have you initiated?

MG: When Beatrice Trussardi asked me to direct her foundation in 2003, we sat down and started thinking what was missing in Milan, what was the niche we could occupy. Many of my projects actually begin with this preliminary research. You just look around and try and see what other people in your field are doing and where there is room for you to operate.

That's how we came to realise that no-one in Italy had yet explored the idea of an institution whose identity was not to be defined by a specific place, by a building or by a museum, but by its very own activities. We simply thought that an institution was to be first and foremost a software, not a hardware. So we started working on commissioning ambitious projects by contemporary artists, each time changing locations and scale. I guess that at the beginning we lost a bit in strength maybe, but we gained in confusion and in speed. We could come and go more easily, and we could get the works out there, in front of everyone, without huge budgets.

The foundation also became a way to explore the city of Milan and rediscover some of its most symbolic or simply most fascinating spaces. And in this way we tried also to approach a public that is not necessarily interested in art, but that one way or the other must connect to contemporary art if it doesn't want to be left out of our present.

So far we have worked on a wide variety of exhibitions and projects. Some of them are very small, almost invisible; for example, every time we do an advertisement for the foundation we ask a different artist to design it, so that literally every space we have is made available for artists. We have also experimented a little with unusual distribution systems for art. A couple of years

ago we organised a group show that only existed in the city circuit of posters and advertisement space. It was very simple: artists were invited to submit works that were then reproduced on posters and disseminated all around the city. It was a show without a venue, a show dispersed potentially everywhere, for everyone to see.

And then of course there are the more ambitious or complicated projects. I can't really say what all the shows of the Trussardi Foundation have in common, but whenever I am asked to describe them I am reminded of a great quote by Tom Eccles (former curator of New York's Public Art Fund, an organisation that really served as inspiration for the Trussardi Foundation). Tom used to say that the role of such institutions should be to allow artists to do what they cannot do in museums or galleries. That we must have a responsibility to try and do what cannot be done elsewhere.

That's why many of the projects of the Trussardi Foundation are actually born as impossible artists' projects. When I start working on shows in Milan, I often ask the artists if there is anything they have been working on and that they couldn't yet realise. Maurizio Cattelan's hanging children (*Untitled*, 2004), for example, was the development of a project that had been refused by the Whitney Museum in New York. Urs Fischer had already tried a couple of times to realise his giant tree covered with drawings (*Let her lady*, 2000–05) and, finally, together with us, he managed to get it done.

Other times we just ask the artists to do something they have never done before. And that's how we got to produce John Bock's first film and to present Martin Creed's first performance. With Trussardi, Anri Sala realised his most ambitious film to date and Paola Pivi recently had her first large-scale exhibition. That's another recurring element in our work: all the exhibitions really feel as



though they are entering into the head of the artists; they are very immersive places. I like to say we organise 'introspectives', not retrospectives. Darren Almond almost literally introduced us to his relatives, realising a sort of family album in motion, while Elmgreen & Dragset immersed the whole city of Milan in a strange collective hallucination, with their car popping out of the ground.

NK: You seem to thrive on working collaboratively: sometimes on modest incursions into public places. With Maurizio Cattelan and Ali Subotnick, you jointly curated the 4th Berlin Biennial in 2006 titled 'Of Mice and Men'. How did you develop a framework for this biennial? Were you conscious of the relentless circuit of international biennales and the need to achieve a project with local and enduring resonances?

MG: When I was invited to present a project for the Berlin Biennial, I decided to extend the invitation to Maurizio and Ali precisely because I had just finished working on another biennial, 'Manifesta', and felt the need to try out a different form of authorship and collaboration. Once again we started by taking a careful look at what exhibitions and the biennial system had become, and studying how to do things differently. A few things became clear right away: first of all we wanted to avoid the usual global sprawl that had become the preferred metaphor for biennials. We didn't want to run around the world looking for supposedly new, young artists. We didn't want the exhibition to resemble a net or a global neural system. We didn't want it to be so connected and chaotic that it could mean almost anything.

We felt we needed to concentrate on one place. First of all we started working in Germany. We travelled almost always by train, not by plane. We tried to see as much as we could in Germany and we also decided to invest time and energy in Berlin: that's why we opened a space, called Gagosian Gallery, in Berlin, where we invited other curators and artists to organise an exhibition per month in the period that preceded the biennial. We also put out an issue of

Charley that made visible the digestive system of the biennial, showing material about artists we had been researching or meeting or just had heard about.

And then finally came the show which we organised on a very precise idea: the whole exhibition took place on one street, in twelve venues that stretched 920 metres from a church to a cemetery, where normal life and art could overlap and disappear into each other. The basic idea was to combine neutral spaces with other locations that were extremely charged both in their appearances and in their history.

So the show took place in apartments, where artists were invited to exhibit among the furniture and the pictures left by the owners of the flats who had been so kind as to leave for the duration of the exhibition. Other locations included dilapidated ballrooms, small offices, empty stables, and most importantly an incredible building, The Jewish School for Girls, which had remained empty and untouched for more than ten years and had preserved the layers of more than eighty years of German history. Every detail in the Jewish school was left as we had found it: the peeling paint, the posters in the rooms, the decoration, sometimes even the old furniture, everything was there as though the students and the teachers had just left. Visiting the exhibition felt like entering a collage: there was this background, which was charged with memories and with the traces of many lives before us, and then on top of it, the artists had layered their works and their images that confronted other traumas and other stories, other rooms and voices and portraits of many other lives, all sharing a sense of alertness and uneasiness.

We had spent a long time researching sites that could act like time capsules and really preserve the history of Berlin and, more importantly, a history of humanity that had revealed men as animals capable of terrible acts of fear, prevarication, violence and surrender. To a certain



left to right
Etchings by Dorota Jurczak, exhibited within the former Jewish School for Girls. Photograph Uwe Walter, courtesy 4th Berlin Biennial for Contemporary Art, 2006.

Former Jewish school for girls, Auguststraße 11-12, Berlin-Mitte. Photograph Uwe Walter, courtesy 4th Berlin Biennial for Contemporary Art, 2006.

extent, 'Of Mice and Men' was a theme show, even though its theme was not a particular thesis – it was more about a set of atmospheres and tensions, in which history and the present chased and mirrored each other. If it didn't sound too ambitious, I would say 'Of Mice and Men' was mostly about life, in its darker moments, and yet, like in a novel, it never really told you what it was about.

NK: Recently you have relocated to New York to take up the position of curator at The New Museum. What projects are you developing, especially considering that The New Museum is in transit, without a gallery space?

MG: I must say it's still a bit early for me to speak about specific projects or what the museum will be like, even though it is a very exciting time we are discussing the first year of programming together with my colleagues Richard Flood and Laura Hoptman. But I can tell you that once again, in an attempt to learn the territory in which the museum will be operating, I have just started working on a small publication, pretty much just a newspaper insert, in which twenty different artists are invited to create a map of downtown New York. I 'GET LOST: Artists Map Downtown New York' includes such artists as 16beaver group, Francis Alys, Isa Genzken and Rirkrit Tiravanija.]

NK: You have been appointed a curatorial 'comrade' at Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev's 2008 Biennale of Sydney. How do you find working across continents/cities, the public/private sector and the art/fair/institutional realm?

MG: I guess sometimes I find it tiring, and there are days you don't get enough sleep and I sound like the complete moron I actually am. But I think this variety of fields in which I operate is important to keep reminding myself that you don't always need to work on a huge project; there are different scales of operation which are all equally valuable for you and for the artists. When working in Berlin, we always used to say you can't go everywhere with a limousine; there are beautiful places where you can only get with a bicycle.

NK: Last year you delivered the Melbourne Art Fair 2006 lecture, an initiative of the City of Melbourne Conversations Program and the Melbourne Art Fair Foundation in association with Monash University Museum of Art, and undertook studio and gallery visits in Australia. Recently you wrote in *Frieze* about your impressions of Melbourne compared with Milan, bemoaning the lack of a contemporary art space in Milan. What are the points of comparison and difference between these cities?

MG: It's always difficult to create comparisons that are really meaningful across different cities and realities. Then again we can only judge by comparing, so there is no escape. I can tell you that what I felt in Melbourne was a commitment to art as a crucial part of our contemporary existence, even though it's a small community, both in the public sector and in the more independent activities you can really get a sense of urgency and commitment to art, and a desire to share this commitment with the whole city. You see, I don't even know if the whole city responds to this, but it is clear that the people involved in art and the ones who care about art feel they need to go out and make other people aware of their interest and their work. And it is precisely this attitude that I find missing in Milan and specifically in its public and political sectors. Of course, the respect and the commitment to art and to being contemporary are not per se a guarantee of good art or of a brilliant art administration, but they are crucial if we want to live in a culture and in a city capable of questioning its present and imagining its future.