

Melbourne art scene inspires Italian spaces



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Tags:

- [italy](#) [1]
- [melbourne](#) [2]
- [Art](#) [3]
- [contemporary art](#) [4]

Category:

- [Culture](#) [5]

Melbourne is considered a city of great wealth in terms of the number of independent and non-profit art spaces. In 2013, Marta Bianchi, researcher for Careof in Milan, Italy, spent eight months investigating the artistic ecosystem of Australia's creative southern city. Her aim was to understand the dynamics of these spaces and export that model to Italy, where independent art initiatives and emerging artists face many difficulties.

During her stay in Australia, Bianchi explored the local art spaces, visited artists' studios and connected with protagonists of the local art scene. Her first observation was the distinctive 'Gen Y' look of Melbourne's art, driven by a youthful demographic..



"In Italy the art-loving public, curators and the exhibiting artists tend to be older. The scene is much more established. Consequently, it often lacks dynamism," says Bianchi.

"There are just a few non-profit spaces in Milan compared to Melbourne. In the last few years not one of them has started a program specifically designed for young artists or curators because of a lack of funding. It's difficult for young artists to start exhibiting, let alone experiment with ideas. That is not the case at all with Melbourne, where the art world is much more accessible no matter what stage you are at in your career."

According to Bianchi, the creativity of Australia's millennials is evident in the way the art is showcased. From shrines hidden in graffiti-covered lanes to mailboxes inside private buildings, Melbournians dare to try unconventional solutions and manage to escape the white-walled gallery standard.

"Work responding to these peculiar spaces can't help being unique," says Bianchi.

Another finding of Bianchi's research demonstrates the benefits of overlapping roles within the industry. In Melbourne an artist is also often a curator and an arts writer. In Italy the boundaries are far more distinct. According to Bianchi, overlapping roles can be seen as a conflict of interest rather than a dynamic mix of skills and experience that add flexibility and allow for collaboration. Bianchi looks at this separation of roles as somehow out-dated and restrictive and feels Italians should look at the versatile Melbournian art community for a fresh perspective.

"It's time to dust off our multi-disciplinary skills," she says, adamant that role flexibility is the key to resilience and survival for Italian artists and spaces alike.

Bianchi presented her findings to the Italian public when she returned in August. Her research outcomes were the starting point for a series of initiatives at Careof that will span throughout 2014. Collaborations include projects with Screen Space and Kings ARI, two Australian artist run spaces, and Un.magazine, an independent art magazine based in Melbourne.

"The way Screen Space and Kings ARI are managed, in addition to their focus on videoart, inspired the first month of programming at Careof," explains Bianchi. "At the end of 2014 a writer from Un.magazine will draw together the threads of the whole experience to share with the art community."

It's not just the Milan arts community that will benefit through Careof's program. Selected Melbournian artists, curators and writers will have the chance to explore the Italian art environment and curate their own show using Careof's vast video archive.

The first such exhibition took place in February and was curated by Simone Hine and Kyle Wise from Screen Space who wanted to present video-art from Australia to an Italian public.

"The Italian public's curiosity toward the Melbournian art scene has been higher than we expected. The audience was not just asking about the work exhibited, but also about the Australian art world in general," Bianchi says of the exhibition's success.

Hine and Weise are examples of the value overlapping roles can bring to a project. Both are curators as well as co-directors of Screen Space as well as Beam Contemporary gallery. Screen Space is a non-profit space, while Beam Contemporary is a commercial gallery and both exist in the same building. This combination is not unusual for Melbourne, but from an Italian perspective it's quite startling.

"In Italy there is a prejudice against non-profit spaces that look for sources of income other than public funding and grants. That is because people think that once you are concerned with selling, you automatically forgo the artistic integrity," explains Bianchi.

"I believe it's possible to run two different activities together without compromising the art and we hope to spread awareness about this dynamic approach. It could really represent a viable model for both emerging and non-profit spaces here."



Rome takes an interest

In Rome's alternative district of San Lorenzo, non-profit space Galleria 219 Est is also interested in the Melbourne art scene. Emerging Melbourne artists Kenny Pittock and Georgina Lee will explore Australian society through an exhibition called "Nothing's happened since yesterday - two artists from Melbourne". According to Roberto D'Onorio, curator of Galleria 291 Est, the work of these two artists reveals two complementary sides of Australian life: corporate and recreational life.

"Australian contemporary art is not well known here yet. We are proud to be among the first to present what is going on in the emerging art scene in Melbourne to an Italian audience."

The aim of the show is not just a one-off exhibition, but rather to engage in a cultural exchange with Melbourne and its artists. In his opinion, the success of the Melbourne model is evident both in the high quality of the artists' work and their professionalism.

"Georgina and Kenny have the advantage of working in Melbourne - a city that awards merit," explains D'Onorio.

"Australian artists are not just able to produce meaningful work, but they are also able to find the best way to exhibit their projects and make a name for themselves."

Like Bianchi, D'Onorio believes that elements of the Melbourne art system have to be adopted in Italy.

"Young artists in Rome are not very entrepreneurial and there is little communication between them. We hope that the insight into the lively and collaborative Melbourne scene will make Italian artists come up with new ideas to open up their own opportunities."

These two exhibitions are perhaps the start of a dialogue between Italian non-profit spaces and the Australian art system that seeks to be mutually beneficially for both artistic communities

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[2] <http://www.australiaunlimited.com/tags/term/melbourne>

[3] <http://www.australiaunlimited.com/tags/term/art>

[4] <http://www.australiaunlimited.com/tags/term/contemporary-art>

[5] <http://www.australiaunlimited.com/category/term/culture>