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Marco Di Lauro for The New York Times

Pepi Marchetti Franchi, director of the new Gagosian Gallery in Rome, looking at a work by Cy Twombly in an exhibition there. [More Photos >](#)

By MICHAEL KIMMELMAN
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ROME

Multimedia

YOU wouldn't know it from wandering around the crowded art fair in Bologna a few weeks ago, or from seeing Larry Gagosian's new gallery in Rome, where some of the moneyed, antiseptic air of the Chelsea of New York reaches the neighborhood around the Spanish Steps. But Italy has become the basket case of Western

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Slide Show

Italy's Contemporary Art Scene

Europe.

So everybody says. It is still tourist heaven, of course, if you're not paying in dollars. In political terms, though, it's forever chasing its own tail. This winter the government, chronically geriatric, fell for the umpteenth time. Decades of festering indecision caused rotting garbage to pile up in the streets of Naples.



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But then there's the contemporary art scene.

A new museum is under construction in Rome, nicknamed Maxxi, designed by [Zaha Hadid](#). A museum opened not long ago in Bologna called Mambo. (Italians love their acronyms.) The Prada Foundation has just bought an exhibition space in the south of Milan; [Rem Koolhaas](#) will be that architect. And in the north of Milan there's Hangar Bicocca, a vast former Pirelli factory devoted to gigantic installations; Anselm Kiefer's, an awesome series of towers built of tottering concrete blocks, has justly become a pilgrimage site.

In Naples, Madre, a contemporary museum, does first-rate shows. Now it has a new place. So does the Maramotti family, which owns Max Mara, a clothing company. This winter the Maramotti children opened a foundation in a converted factory on an improbable stretch of loveless industrial and office buildings in Reggio Emilia to house the collection of their late father.

More is happening in Turin, where the Castello di Rivoli has long reigned as the premier museum of contemporary art in Italy. And after years of dawdling, Venice has recently turned its customs house over to [François Pinault](#), the French billionaire who already has the Palazzo Grassi and says he will use them both to show off his collection. That's hardly the best way for any city to take up new art, but it says something about Italy that Pinault chose Venice over Paris, which wanted him.

To get perspective, I dropped in on Lorcan O'Neill, a dealer who moved from London to Rome several years ago and now runs one of the best high-end galleries in town. He's a lanky Irishman with a roster of big-name artists and a modest space on a side street in Trastevere. We sat in the back room, surrounded by stacks of the many art magazines published here.

"Foreigners feel free to make fun of Italy and complain that it's creaky and corrupt," he said. "For whatever reason, they think it's charming to insult Italians, never mind that



Al

then they go off and buy Prada, eat Italian food and covet Ferraris.” In terms of new art, he added, Italy is in some ways livelier than England, where outside London it’s pretty much a wasteland.

So the art scene here is booming, I said.

He laughed at my ignorance: “It’s complicated. It would be bizarre if Italy didn’t benefit like everyone else.” He was talking about the global art boom being a tide lifting all boats.

Many public art institutions here are like the Italian government, he went on. They’re dysfunctional. The state still thinks of culture almost exclusively in terms of antiquities, so that’s basically where all the money goes, what there is of it, “on top of which,” he said, “there’s historically a very complex and often antagonistic relationship between the public and private spheres,” which is why a city like Milan has no public museum of modern art, but it has all sorts of private initiatives by people who think they can get things done more efficiently. ...

I confessed to being, suddenly, a little confused.

“See for yourself,” he said, giving me what you might call an Italian shrug and sending me off into the drizzly night.

“IT’S medieval,” the veteran curator Germano Celant said. He’s the Richelieu of contemporary art in this country. Now he sounded more like an avenging angel. “All these different villages, city against city, museum against museum — every institution is a one-person project; otherwise nothing happens. There’s no structure, no official culture of expertise.”

A recent whirlwind tour of various contemporary art museums and collections, girded by the obligatory pit stops for bucatini, turned up plenty that’s going on, much of it excellent. But Mr. Celant is right. Responsibility for contemporary art here clearly falls, as it long has, on regions and cities and, above all, on private entrepreneurs, who at least since the war have recognized that Italy’s future prestige rests on its artisanal past.

But whereas the Museum of Modern Art, the Tate and the Pompidou have emerged in the United States, Britain and France during that time as the big institutions around which smaller museums and private foundations have arisen as complements and alternatives, there’s no [MoMA](#) here. No cohesion. All dispersed energy. Talk over the years about accumulating a modern art collection out of the [Venice Biennale](#) — a ready-made source that over decades, wisely culled, could have produced a first-class museum — typically

came to nothing.

So private collectors like Prada in Milan and Sandretto Re Rebaudengo in Turin and regional museums like Rivoli have been left to pick up the slack, for which they're not really suited. The Italian tax system further burdens them. In the United States, collectors give to museums and earn a tax break. Not here. There's no guarantee that gifts will even be accepted. Francesco Semmola is a private art insurer I ran across one afternoon at the Bologna fair. With a tight smile fixed on his face, he told me he insures private Italian collectors and foundations but won't ever deal with the government. "The sad reality is that most art in museums in Italy is not insured," he said.

He read my expression and gave me that same shrug.

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Mr. Semmola went on: A university near Urbino, he said, which 20 years ago received an important library of thousands of volumes, has recently had to return the gift because nobody ever got around to unpacking the books. "And also a very important collector of contemporary art died, and when his family tried to pay inheritance tax with part of the collection, nobody working for the state would dare say how much it was worth," he added. "So the heirs kept the pictures, paid the tax, then sold the art at auction for vastly more money. Like I said, nobody in the state wants to take responsibility."

Carlo Bach was wandering around the fair, too. He oversees Illy's art program, which commissions artists to design the company's coffee cups, then uses money raised through sales for scholarships for young artists and catalogs for art shows. "In Italy, owners of big industries are connected with culture, even though there's no tax advantage, as in America, because entrepreneurs here love their country, and when they see the government losing the faculty to sustain art, they're inclined to do it themselves."

Love or vanity. Credit them for doing something. I found Lia Rumma, who as a young collector opened a gallery in Naples in 1971, then a second one in Milan 18 years later. Her husband, Marcello Rumma, published art books and worked on groundbreaking shows. He died in 1970. "I wanted to defend the legacy of my husband and open up Italy, as he had tried to do, to the international scene," Ms. Rumma said. At the beginning her gallery showed Minimalism and Conceptualism when they were nearly unknown here. Gradually she nurtured a coterie of young collectors.

"But the market can't substitute for what really sustains artists, meaning museums, public support and recognition," she said. "Prada and other private places substitute here for the state, but they will never take the place of public institutions." I mentioned Madre, the museum in her city, Naples, and she nodded.

“Yes, but one swallow doesn’t mean it’s spring.”

Turns out the country is full of fine but lonely swallows. The Fondazione Maramotti is a handsome homage to a serious, mainstream collector, Achille Maramotti, who may be excused if in later years, save for occasional works by Philip Taaffe, Peter Cain and others, he bought with somewhat less distinction. The rooms of early Kounellis and Pino Pascali and Manzoni and Pistoletto are lovely.

In Turin, Patrizia Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, working closely with Francesco Bonami (like Mr. Celant, he is one of Italy’s celebrity curators), oversees a foundation that has staged a variety of world-class shows. Mrs. Sandretto Re Rebaudengo and her husband own a villa in town packed with art. “When I started to collect and visited Germany and London, I was shocked to see contemporary Italian artists who were nowhere to be found in Italy,” she recalled. “The focus here on antiquity is a way not to be involved more in this moment. But I think things are changing.”

They clearly have changed in Turin, which had to redefine itself as Fiat floundered. “The city realized that contemporary art was a way to build a new identity,” she said, which is what helped to get the Castello di Rivoli [Museum of Contemporary Art](#) off the ground in the ’80s, with backing by the Piedmont region. Rivoli occupies a Savoy castle perched outside Turin. The collection now totals maybe 300 works, mostly large installations, said Marcella Beccaria, the curator. Lothar Baumgarten has painted the walls of one room an electric blue and added bird feathers. [Sol LeWitt](#) did murals in another room. A show of paintings from the Hayward in London arrived the other day. About 100,000 people visit Rivoli each year.

“It’s only recently that people in Italy have begun to recognize contemporary art as a cultural value, which other countries use, for economic purposes,” Ms. Beccaria said. “Italians have been slow to see there’s a whole economic world out there that rotates around it.”

BUT Turin is one case, Rome another. The American artist Joseph Kosuth was riding the train one recent morning. He recalled moving here in the ’90s. He liked having room to work and think, and, well, “It was Rome.” That’s what Larry Gagosian has been saying, too. Never mind that skeptics think he’s here to court Cy Twombly, the most lucrative expatriate.

“Larry came exactly not for the reasons people think but for the most banal reason,” Pepi Marchetti Franchi, who manages Gagosian’s gallery, insisted. “When he first saw Rome long ago, he fell in love with the city, and now he can afford to be extravagant, and he

thinks artists he's interested in will feel the same way about exhibiting here. It's not for the market. There hardly is any market." The gallery opened with an exhibition of Twomblys, by the way.

Whatever. Romance does account for much of Rome's attraction. It's what brought Cornelia Lauf here years ago. She was married to Mr. Kosuth. A veteran curator, she ticked off names of galleries like Monitor, Magazino, S.A.L.E.S. and 1/9, which have brought a fresh vibe to the city. "It's definitely livelier," she said. She introduced Paola Capata, who runs Monitor. We met before a large floor sculpture in compartments filled with what looked like tools and hay: the work of Kostis Velonis, she said, pointing nearby to a young doe-eyed man in skullcap and baggy jeans.

He smiled hopefully.

"I can't say Rome is fabulous," Ms. Capata said. "It's not like in Holland or France or Britain, where museums support their own young artists. But it's a good place to work, and in the last few years it has certainly started to change."

Where it ends up will depend partly on Maxxi, the state's modern art museum. A building is under construction. Anna Mattiolo, who has worked in the government arts administration for years, directs it. She sat at a tiny table in the cafe next door and described how tricky it had been, over the years, getting Culture Ministry bureaucrats, steeped in older art, to approve contemporary acquisitions. But it has gotten better, she said. Attitudes are evolving.

But, I said, the government has collapsed. The building is half-built. There's no real budget to grow the collection. How can she be sure the next government won't quash the whole project?

"It's our culture," Ms. Mattiolo said. "There's no point in fighting it. It's impossible to say what will happen. All I know is that if we call great international artists and ask them to do exhibitions, they will come."

She added, "This is Italy," and shrugged.

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