

Art Market *International*

Foreign galleries make move on Italy

But questions remain as to whether there are enough high-level collectors to sustain them

GALLERIES

ITALY. When the London-based contemporary art dealer Thomas Dane decided to open a second gallery, he bypassed the more obvious locations of New York or Hong Kong in favour of Naples. Dane is one of several international galleries that have opened spaces in Italy in the past year, including London's Victoria Miro and Paris-based Alberta Pane in Venice, plus Postmasters of New York, which opened a "nomadic branch" in Rome last November.

The move makes some sense. Despite a fluctuating economy, Italy has a strong collecting tradition. François Chantala, a partner at Thomas Dane, says: "The scene in Italy has always been discreet, established and savvy – not dissimilar to Germany, Holland and Belgium in the 1960s and 70s." But with little evidence the domestic market is expanding, does Italy have the critical mass of high-level collectors required to sustain these galleries, or is their arrival merely a symptom of the enduring appeal of la dolce vita?

London's Lisson Gallery closed its Milan space last year after only five years, deciding not to renew its lease. It launched in 2011 as an "artist project space", a popular term for Italian outposts. Greg Hilty, Lisson's curatorial

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director, says: "When we opened the space, we already had an idea of opening a gallery in New York. Milan served as an opportunity to fine-tune our ability to run Lisson Gallery internationally." Closing Milan, he says, had more to do with "the future trajectory of the gallery", which will prioritise the UK and US, not gamble on the local market.

Dane's decision to open a "part residency, part project space, part exhibition space" within the restored 19th-century Casa Ruffo overlooking the Bay of Naples may have raised eyebrows, but, Chantala asks, "Why not? Artists have always loved Naples. Its energy, bustling chaos and romantic decrepitude are inspiring."

The gallery had considered New York but most of its artists already have representation there. Besides, the venture is also a reaction to an art world that, Chantala says, "has become very formatted. We had a desire to do something a little uncharted amid the conventional gallery circuit from New York to London to Paris." He hopes the Italian outpost will provide an antidote to hectic fairs.



Thomas Dane Gallery in the Casa Ruffo, Naples. Left, a detail of Mark Wallinger's *Genius of Venice* (1991)

"The theatre of selling a work of art shouldn't be just ten minutes in front of a painting. Bringing people to Naples will be a real sensorial experience," he says. Dane plans two to three shows a year, launching on 27 January with an exhibition of works by Bruce Conner, Steve McQueen, Catherine Opie, Caragh Thuring and Kelley Walker, which relate either directly or indirectly to Naples.

Postmasters, which joined long-term ex-pats Gagosian Gallery and Lorcan O'Neill in Rome late last year, is experimenting with a pop-up model that Paulina Bebecka, the director at large, says befits a programme that "questions the status quo".

She adds: "There are other international galleries in Rome, and more are coming. Not everyone needs to go to London or Hong Kong to expand." The first exhibition, of Sally Smart, took place in 19unosunove gallery, but future shows might be staged anywhere – from an old butcher's shop to a palazzo.

Most of these Italian ventures are pitched as artist-led. With competition

from other galleries, keeping your stable happy is crucial, lest they be tempted elsewhere. "Venice is a city beloved by artists, and being able to extend the opportunity to respond to and show in such an inspirational setting was central to our decision," Miro says of her space in the former Galleria Il Capricorno, which was directed by her close friend, Bruna Aickelin, for five decades.

Since opening in May 2017 with a show of works by Chris Ofili, Miro has worked on relationships forged by Aickelin and made sales to international collectors. But for her, the Venice gallery – where a new exhibition of Mark Wallinger (in collaboration with Hauser & Wirth) opens on 27 January with a masquerade dinner to coincide with the Carnevale di Venezia – is "about creating a new context for our artists rather than necessarily being market-led", she says, adding: "The most important thing for me is how inspiring the space has been to artists."

Anna Brady



Thomas Dane is the latest to open an Italian gallery, which will also offer a residency

A trip down glasnost lane

MOSCOW. Nearly 30 years ago, Soviet officials—keen to demonstrate they were holding up their end of the glasnost bargain by opening up Russian culture to the West—organised the first international auction of Russian contemporary art in Moscow, in partnership with Sotheby's. The move was surprising, as the government had, until then, refused to recognise present-day Socialist Realists who spurned the officially endorsed art, which had prevailed for decades. But, as one official rationalised at the time: "What is un-Marxist about selling works of art so they might become better known all over the world?" Despite

protests from the Soviet Artists Union, which opposed the sale of cultural heritage to foreign buyers, the auction—which paired leading contemporary "unofficial artists" such as Ilya Kabakov and Grisha Bruskin with greats from Russia's past, like Aleksandr Rodchenko and Varvara Stepanova—was a success, raising \$3.5m over a total estimate of \$1.3m–\$1.8m.

This pivotal moment is memorialised in the exhibition *Bidding for Glasnost: Sotheby's 1988 Auction in Moscow* (23 January–28 February) at the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, which seeks to highlight the era's Socialist Realist art.

The show will include several of the auction's original lots—including Kabakov's *All About Him* (1971), which Sotheby's then chairman Alfred Taubman bought and presented to the USSR's Ministry of Culture as a founding artwork for a future museum of contemporary art—plus archival documents, new interviews with participants and video of the full sale, presided over by Simon de Pury.

"We really wanted this show to explore in detail this monumental sale; to listen to all the voices—from the artists to the organisers to the collectors to the media," says Anton Belov, the director of the Garage. "It's a story that has to be told fully, and we hope the show starts a lot of conversations." **S.P.H.**

Comment

A view from Italy

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The main question regarding the foreign galleries that are opening offices in Italy is: who are their customers? Before Brexit, many significant Italian galleries chose London as their headquarters to avoid the bureaucratic constraints, the difficulties in exporting works of art and the hefty VAT rate—at 22%, among the highest in Europe—in their home country.

So why, today, do some foreign galleries choose Italy? Presumably, their target clientele is wealthy Italian investors who can now find at home the art they usually see in London, Paris, New York, or in any major fair abroad.

But note how these dealers do not make Italy their main office. Even if every commercial activity that takes place within Italy complies with its tax regime, sales made outside will conform to the tax laws of the country in which the transaction takes place. In short: a work exhibited in Italy by a UK dealer could be sold in England. By operating as a subsidiary, dealers get the access while sidestepping the red tape.

In Rome, Naples and Venice, the galleries have chosen "destination" art cities, home to both rich Italian collectors and foreigners. The motives of glamour, cultural safari and collecting tourism are not limited to the electrifying climate of large fairs. In addition, foreign artists enjoy exhibiting and working in Italy.

These factors must also be considered in evaluating the short season of Lisson Gallery in Milan, which—despite being the economic capital of Italy—is

still rather weak in terms of public institutions dedicated to contemporary art. Nor do Milan's private museums, such as the Fondazione Prada, exhibit a broad enough range of works to constitute a major comprehensive museum collection. It is also significant that Milan, where 80% of the major Italian galleries operate, has only recently succeeded in improving its fair, Miart, although it has still not closed the gap with Artissima in Turin.

The type of proposals of foreign galleries in Italy should also be examined for signals of intent.

For example, Gagosian in Rome, which opened in 2007, marks its seasons with exhibitions of great value but plays it safe with limited financial and organisational exposure (or supports the fashion world, as was the case with the Giuseppe Penone solo show last year, which coincided with Fendi's unveiling of a new sculpture by Penone outside its Rome headquarters).

For these reasons, the opening of Victoria Miro and Alberta Pane in Venice should be objectively considered. These arrivals could be signs of revival for a city that for many years has embodied the paradox of being home to the most important art exhibition in the world, the Venice Biennale, yet with a glaring weakness in its own gallery offerings.

However, the influx of showrooms from the multinational dealers is at the expense of small- and medium-sized Italian galleries, which face enormous difficulties both in the organisation of their home market and in the pressure to compete and survive in a globalised system, where failure to participate in international fairs can penalise smaller operations.

They are the ones that most stand to suffer.



Simon de Pury presides over the first sale of Russian contemporary art in Moscow, in 1988

DANE: AMEDEO BENESTANTE; WALLINGER: HAUSER & WIRTH/TODD WHITE; ART PHOTOGRAPHY: MOSCOW: SOTHEBY'S/SERGEE BORISOV