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*Backstage With Mary Angela Schroth*

## **In Rome, a Force**

### **For Contemporary Art**

By CKSTAGE WITH MARY ANGELA SCHROTH

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Sala 1 -- one of the first galleries in Rome to showcase international contemporary artists -- is quietly celebrating 40 years at the vanguard of the city's art scene. Its American curator, Mary Angela Schroth, has directed the nonprofit exhibition space since 1985, often venturing where few Italians have dared to tread.

A pioneer in a city concerned more with its illustrious past, she has premiered young artists and organized cutting-edge exhibitions such as "Moscow: Third Rome," Italy's first look at Russian artists of perestroika, in 1989; "Affinities," a 1993 collective of South African artists, including the debut of William Kentridge; and the first retrospective of controversial French body artist Orlan, in 1996. Anticipating the global mania for Chinese art, in 2004 Ms. Schroth exhibited a group of female artists from China addressing difficult and very personal subjects, titled "Times of Women." Next month she is organizing the exhibition "Beijing 2008: Time Bricks," a major site-specific installation by avant-garde Chinese artist Huang Rui, at Rome's Museo delle Mura (Feb. 2-June 4).

In recent years Rome has gone from a languishing artistic backwater to a cosmopolitan contemporary art capital with a proliferation of new, more internationally focused commercial galleries, including a space opened in December by American mega-dealer Larry Gagosian. Rome is also seeing a boom in the construction of new cultural buildings, starting with Renzo Piano's Auditorium and culminating soon with Zaha Hadid's new building for Maxxi -- a museum dedicated to the exhibition of contemporary art and architecture -- scheduled for completion by the end of the year. The highly anticipated renovation of the Palazzo delle Esposizioni opened last October with a Mark Rothko retrospective.

Located in a stunning brick ex-basilica, the Sala 1 space was offered by the Holy See in the 1960s for use as an art center to priest-sculptor Tito Amodei, now 81, who still keeps a studio there. Ms. Schroth -- a native of Winchester, Virginia, who moved to Europe in the 1970s -- spoke to us at her gallery about the Roman art scene.

--Cathryn Drake

#### **How did you end up working in contemporary art in Rome?**

In France in the '70s I met Joël Hubaut, one of France's most important performance and multimedia artists, who was based in Caen, Normandy. Hubaut said, "Let's make this artists' space" -- so we opened this beautiful white garage called Nouveau Mixage, in the historic center. Everyone who was anybody in the underground scene, the post-Fluxus artists, would come just to have a pizza with the group and Hubaut afterward. He programmed the "suicide" of Mixage in 1985 -- all artists' spaces are destined to end because artists don't want to work for other artists. And I was ready for a change after seven years in France. I thought Rome was going to be just one of a series of stops; I had no idea that I would stay almost 25 years now. The French were horrified, of course. They said, There's nothing in Rome, why wouldn't you go to Milan or Turin? I said, I know, but I am sure the artists are there.

## How has the Roman art scene changed since you arrived?



The Sala 1 gallery during the 'Art Mama' exhibition of works by Tatsumi Orimoto last year

When I came in 1983, there was nothing -- a few galleries, and obviously people like second-generation collector Fabio Sargentini, but only a handful that were really any good. There were the wealthy Roman ladies we used to call the "fur-coat brigade" who had decided to open galleries -- they were professional for Rome and they had good artists. The Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna was moribund; the Palazzo delle Esposizioni had been closed for some years and finally reopened in 1989. There was no city museum of contemporary art.

At first I worked with Francesco Moschini at his art-and-architecture gallery. We organized a huge show called "Latrina," in an abandoned public toilet from the 1930s near Piazza Navona. It was really an event; I think 1,000 people came. You could only have a few people go down at a time because there was only one stairway. There were people like Dominot, the transsexual performance artist, who did something in one of the stalls, and Mark Wingrave, from the British School. It was cool, but it was more of a happening because the gallery situation was not so lively.

## How did you find the rather unusual Sala 1 space?

Enzo Forti, who was prominent in the Italian Communist party and was an artist, had come to an exhibit I had curated and said, "You really have to meet this priest and see this space." So I made an appointment with this priest -- Tito Amodè, a sculptor -- and discovered one of the most beautiful art spaces I've ever seen. I proposed an exhibit right away, and he said, "No, we're more interested in works done for the site, like sculpture." And that was what I'd done in France, so we had the same mindset.

My first show there was a group of students from the academy in Düsseldorf -- an American and others from Yugoslavia, Switzerland, and Germany -- very young artists who had their own space. They brought me this wonderful proposal -- it was extraordinary -- all based on works for the space, called "Cum Grano Salis" ["With a Grain of Salt"]. The opening was a huge success -- everybody came -- and it put Sala 1 on the map. So that show turned out to be kind of a pilot project and typical of what Sala 1 is good at: getting proper funding from institutions but taking a risk on the artists.

## How has Sala Uno survived so long as a nonprofit in a country focused more on historical art?

Well, modesty. I don't have any illusions of grandeur here. We've been very honest with the artists and curators and public and collectors. And I have never met an artist who didn't want to do a project in Rome. I also think artists are attracted by the fact that they don't have to sell the work they show. So the artist is free, and we're free. It's really a ticket that works. And we try to curate exhibitions that have some kind of interest for the public, which is why we avoid doing solo shows and search out a project that is unusual. Then we will usually be able to start out with an institutional partner and search out a private partner.

We've also survived because personally I've put a huge amount of energy in managing the space. I spend about 50% of my time on fund raising and the rest on curating. Because I am American I

really don't have the same limits as far as taking chances. I'm not afraid to ask for the collaboration we need.

### **How is your relationship with your landlord, the Vatican?**

Father Tito told me years ago that one of his secrets was not involving the Vatican -- not asking them for funding, for instance. He said the more you ask, the more you have to give. So our secret has been independence. Of course, the Holy See knows what we do -- and we would never obviously use the space for any political action that would give any problems to the church. Inherent in art itself we've done some very provocative exhibitions, but obviously we're not going to do a pro-abortion exhibit at Sala 1. But we wouldn't want to do that anyway -- that's not our mission or interest, and there is so much to show with art and music and performance and film.

I don't think the Holy See is particularly interested in contemporary art, and we're trying to change that. One of our big projects now is working with one of our artists in the construction of new churches so that art has a role the way it did 400 years ago. It's very slow -- the church has lost a lot of time since the years when the popes and bishops were aristocrats and extremely knowledgeable about art.

### **What are the most significant new elements that have emerged recently in Rome's art scene?**

Macro [Museum of Contemporary Art of Rome] opened the ex-beer factory in the 1990s, and the prior director made a wonderful series of group exhibitions of local artists. The present director, Danilo Eccher, has made it a more international venue. Now that they have the [additional] big space in the ex-slaughterhouse we are seeing large group exhibitions like those you would see in any international venue. And Maxxi [National Museum of 21st Century Arts] has been active in the last four or five years.

### **What do you think is creating the current buzz about contemporary art in the city?**

The big draw is Rome itself as a city. I think after 9/11 people were looking for a new, almost idealistic city. And of course Italy, in spite of its problems, has always had this great romantic attachment for everyone in the world.

### **How have you chosen the artists whose work you have shown?**

I think part of it is instinct and part of it is experience. The years in France were fundamental because Joël Hubaut would really show me what was interesting from an artist's standpoint. One of our big successes at Sala 1 has been listening to the artists and their ideas. Some of our best shows have been curated by artists.

- For more information, see [www.salauno.com](http://www.salauno.com).