Other People and Their Ideas

No 13

Massimo Minini

Interview by Barbara Casavecchia

Massimo Minini's eponymous art gallery is located in Brescia – a city 90km east of Milan. He opened his first gallery, Banco, in the same city on 23 October 1973, after working at Flash Art magazine. During Banco's first year of operation he showed Gilbert & George, Sol LeWitt, Giuseppe Chiari, Victor Burgin, Giorgio Griffa and Luis Camnitzer. Conceptual art, Arte Povera and Minimalism were Minini's early focus, and keeping a keen eye both on the Italian and international scene has been a permanent feature of his long career, from the Italian artists, such as Maurizio Cattelan and Vanessa Beecroft, he focused on in the 1990s to, in recent years, his interest in artists such as Dara Friedman, Jan De Cock and Tino Sehgal. In 2010 Pizzini/Sentences was published, a collection of Minini’s sharp, aphoristic commentaries on all the artists he has worked with over the years. On Hans-Peter Feldmann, for example: ‘We found that we have many similar attitudes, a certain sense of irony, a detachment from the quest for success, firm convictions, an interest in cemeteries and brassiere ads.’
ART REVIEW  You’ve been showing art in Brescia for 41 years. What does it mean to be a ‘provincial’, or maybe just ‘peripheral’, gallery today? Or an ‘international’ one?

Massimo Minini  Today everything is mixed. When I opened Banca, Brescia was not on the map. Somehow, involuntarily, I ‘created’ Brescia – for a certain world map. Being here meant fewer expenses, the possibility of starting up slowly, of having good artists showing with me, as they said, ‘because I do not have a gallery in Brescia’. Today, when many artists just have one gallery, it makes you laugh. It’s wrong, but it’s the way it goes. Then the fax was born, and art fairs, and the Internet, everything boomed, so that life in the provinces offered other advantages. You are more visible than you might be if you were hidden in a large city, as Julius Caesar said. Art Basel asked me to contribute some texts for their next catalogue. They gave me five reasons for this request: one, the longevity of the gallery; two, my ability to establish relations with artists; three, writing the Pizzini; four, my particular way of setting up the stand; and five, my gallery’s unusual provincial location. Being in Brescia was a plus.

AR  The whole art system has transformed – exploded, really – in the time that you’ve been a gallery. Are these positive changes, in your opinion?

MM  Everything has exploded; the world has exploded. [When I started working] I was earning 200,000 lire [a year] – today’s equivalent would be €2,000 or four million lire. Twenty times more. And with today’s €2,000 you do not live as well as you used to with the old 200,000 lire. Today we run 20 times faster. In a day, we wrote ten to 15 letters, made ten phone calls. Now, between emails, phone calls and texts, we launch maybe 200 messages per day. And finance has a power that it didn’t have – the market has been replaced by the supermarket, the Castelli model by the Gagosian model. The supermarket obliterates the meaning of works. When you look at a painting hanging from a wall, you cannot see the content, the message, if there is one. No, you see the price it achieved at the last auction.

AR  You open your book on the history of your gallery [Massimo Minini: Quarantenni 1972–2012, 2013] with a hommage to two great loves of yours, an artist and a writer: Giulio Paolino and Italo Calvino. Is this the way your stories with artists begin, too? Because of mutual admiration? Or is it possible for you and an artist to work together without liking each other?

MM  Of course it’s possible, and in fact sometimes one puts up with a lot...if an artist does not like you very much, but she or he ‘works’, you do not give her or him a kick in the pants, do you? It helps the gallery to live and to show artists you love, maybe, but who do not work (yet)...

AR  And who has ‘worked’ the best? What exhibitions have borne most fruit?

MM  Tangible fruit in terms of sales: among the latest would be Anish Kapoor, David Maljkovic and Giulio Paolino. Image-wise, that would be the supermarket obliterates the meaning of works. When you look at a painting hanging from a wall, you cannot see the content, the message, if there is one. No, you see the price it achieved at the last auction.


AR  You’ve often invited artists to collaborate on joint projects. Why?

MM  I love to put artists in dialogue. Sometimes I like to put them on the spot, to see how they cope. In some cases, artists were looking for each other: I invited Gabriele Basilico and Dan Graham to photograph Brescia, and they were both enthusiastic about working together. When Peter Halley learned about my proposal that he work with Carla Accardi, he almost fainted. When I told Letizia Battaglia that her photos would be exhibited with those of Francesca Woodman, she was incredibly touched: I didn’t know it, but she had always hoped it would happen. So, a little I understand, a little I guess right. And anyway I have four rooms in the gallery, and it’s not so easy to fill them with only one artist. David Maljkovic, Monica Bonvicini and Hans-Peter Feldmann did very well, though.

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AR  Whom, among artists and also collectors, did you court for years before he or she ceded, and who never said yes?

MM  I did court Richard Long and Richard Tuttle, but I’ve never been able to convince them to show at the gallery. Maybe artists called Richard are not for me. Long has been a real passion, his works were extraordinary. He has worked with Gian Enzo Sperone and then Tucci Russo, in Italy. We were about to close a deal for a show, then Tuttle decided to oppose... But now Long’s works are too repetitive. He does well, but he doesn’t intrigue me any more. On the other hand, I’m still in love with Tuttle. Recently, I’ve tried again to convince him. I sent him my book of Pizzini, in which I talk about him. He likes it, he thanks me, he no longer has a gallery in Italy, but since we did not work together in the past – he says – we will keep doing so in the future!

AR  You’re renowned for your sense of humour. Do you remember any occasion on which it saved your life?

MM  No, instead I remember many occasions when my jokes were misunderstood and made me risk my life and limb. Irony is a double-edged sword. If you are dealing with someone a bit too serious, they can think you’re taking the piss. Always check out the level of wit of who’s in front of you.

AR  Going back to the Pizzini: writing has run in parallel with being a gallery for you. When did you realise that you wanted to write?

MM  Let’s say that I’ve learned to write (assuming I ever have) late – around the age of sixty. I do not know what happened, but there was a change. I read and reread only a few books. I like to reread, to understand how a writer writes; I become a reader of the second and then maybe of the third level. I try to reproduce certain ways of writing that have impressed me. I do not go for War and Peace, only short stories and blurbs. Then, one night the Pizzini were born... I presented them as labels in my booth at Artissima in Turin in 2009, with an English subtitle, Sentences, borrowed from Sol LeWitt. An unexpected hit.

AR  In recent years, you dealt also with design and especially with photography, by creating a sort of visual archive of Italian art. Why did you get so passionate about it?

MM  I celebrate my anniversaries by talking about something else. For the 30-year anniversary of my gallery I thought about putting together a book, then a collection and finally an exhibition of portraits of Italian artists by great Italian photographers. I started with buying images by Elisabetta Catalano, Paolo
Mussat Sartor and Giorgio Colombo. At that stage, I had 30 portraits and felt like keeping going: it was too small a collection. I talked about it with Egidio Marzona, in Berlin, a great collector of everything. “I have 2,000 photos,” he said. I felt lost. I exchanged some things with him. He took a Mangold drawing from me, I could take as many photos as I wished. Then I had too. I understood I had to do a proper project. I wrote down a list of photographers: half I knew, half I drove out. That’s how I met Nino Migliori, Mario Cresci, Gianni Berengo Gardin, Ferdinando Scianna... In the end, it didn’t take me long. A couple of years and 500 photos later, I published a book with Photology (United Artists of Italy, 2008), and the exhibition/collection was ready. The collection became a worldwide ambassador for Italian art, shown everywhere from the Musée d’Art Moderne in Saint-Etienne, to the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels, the Palazzo delle Stelline in Milan, the Biennal of Photography in Amsterdam and the Estorick Collection in London. My only regret is I didn’t succeed in bringing it to Rome, where I’ve tried everywhere – from MAXXI to MACRO, from Calcografia to GNAM. Nothing.

AR: Do you think it’s important to reflect a given national or cultural identity? Does it still make sense?

MM: Absolutely not. We’re in Europe, we don’t do wars between Bergamo and Brescia any more. In this reigning culture of globalisation, though, you’ll notice centrifugal and centripetal forces. The more everything goes global, the more some fringes hold on to their little culture, their genius loci. I’m not talking about ethno-political fractions (Basque, inhabitants of the Padania, the Po Valley,Corsican, Cypriot, Flemish), in a word, border zones compressed by dominating cultures. Even Manifesta (the European biennial of contemporary art) moves its exhibition around ‘borderline’ areas of culture. Ethnic groups express specific requests: what high culture defines as ‘provincialism’ – ie, lock up behind your ramparts and keep quiet. But there’s also a provincialism of high cultures, when, by presuming to encompass everything in themselves, they snub and castrate the impulses of smaller cultures, without realising that they’re flattening out debate.

For instance, if you go to Borneo, you don’t come across Sandokan [the fictional nineteenth-century pirate created by Emilio Salgari], but Dolce & Gabbana. Now, you find works in English by artists from Trentino: they do it to make themselves understood by a wider public, but they don’t see they’re losing autonomy. On Lake Garda, you read: Zimmer frei, because people are afraid that German tourists wouldn’t understand camere libere. In Germany, on the highway, they write Ausfahr. Nobody feels the need to add ‘exit’. Instead, if you go to Adro or Piffione, now the mayors add a little sticker below, with ‘Ader’ or ‘Piffi’, as if to state: we have our language, we have our roots, without realising they are only exposing themselves to ridicule. If one avoids this zecchale [crap], I think it could still make sense to talk about Italian identity. But Italian artists trying to ape the ‘international language’ remind me of Renato Carosone’s ‘Tu Vuoi Fì l’Americano’ [You Want to Be American], a song in Neapolitan from 1956, satirising the massive Americanisation of postwar Italy.

AR: Where do you go to see a show, when you’re not obliged to? Can you still do it?

MM: Mainly ancient art museums with major collections. I don’t find exhibitions too attractive, but recently I saw Sembo at Palazzo del Monte in Padua, Chardin and Zurbarán at Palazzo dei Diamanti in Ferrara, Antonello da Messina at Mart in Rovereto. I need to brush up. I like prehistory. I’ve been working on some lectures on the relationship between prehistoric and Land art, I’m finalising the texts and images.

AR: Are there still exhibitions in your ‘must do’ drawer?

MM: The exhibition I just did at the Triennale in Milan [Quarantanni d’Artecontemporanea: Massimo Minini 1973-2003] may have consequences. I think I’m a bit tired of doing exhibitions. I’d need a museum, now. Maybe I could open it in Brescia with the Municipal Councillor for Culture, Laura Castellietti, who could give the town this new adventure. I’m sure she will listen to me.