



**ILEANA**  
**SONNABEND**  
AN ITALIAN PORTRAIT

# PREFACE

Both Peggy Guggenheim and Ileana Sonnabend were successful gallerists and peerless collectors. In New York in the 1940s Ileana and her first husband Leo Castelli frequented Peggy's Art of This Century museum-gallery—about which Leo Castelli remarked “Peggy's gallery was a sensation....Noone realized that Peggy was doing something of epoch-making importance.” Peggy was born in New York and Ileana in Bucharest, but each conducted her career in the New and the Old Worlds. In addition to collecting European abstract and Surrealist art, Peggy's patronage, at least for the five-year duration of Art of This Century, incorporated the generation of the American Abstract Expressionists. Ileana Sonnabend, over a fifty-year period, promoted the avant-gardes that followed— as if in a line of succession from Peggy.

This exhibition is therefore a tribute to Ileana Sonnabend as a kindred spirit, however different in personality, to Peggy Guggenheim. Each were in close contact with the artists whose works they promoted, but in their quest for new talent there was an important difference: Peggy relied considerably on the advice of remarkable men (and one woman, Nellie van Doesburg) who frequented her circle—Marcel Duchamp, Samuel Beckett, Herbert Read, James Johnson Sweeney, Howard Putzel for example. This courageous but also self-deprecating talent of listening to others and then taking decisive action was to her credit, and a way of understanding her success. By contrast—and the *hommages* in this catalogue written by Achille Bonito Oliva and Germano Celant amply testify to this—Ileana refined her own eye, made her own choices, and had the confidence of her own taste and intuitions. She is fairly considered among the greatest dealers of her time.



I would like to thank Nina Sundell and Antonio Homem, daughter and adopted son of Ileana, for their readiness to lend the works in this catalogue to the exhibition *Ileana Sonnabend. An Italian Portrait*, and also extend greetings to Margaret, David and Marianne Sundell. I would like to thank Attilio and Gabriella Codognato for their support of the exhibition. Antonio Homem, drawing upon his incomparable knowledge of the collection, selected the works with Italy as the leitmotif. Ileana and Michael Sonnabend felt a strong affinity for Italy, and for Venice in particular where for decades they kept an apartment. Fourteen of the almost fifty artists represented here are Italians. They remind us of Ileana's promotion of Italian art in France and America, by exhibiting the work of Mario Schifano and Michelangelo Pistoletto in her first Paris gallery early in their careers, or by organizing Piero Manzoni's and Giulio Paolini's first exhibitions in the United States, or by launching the Arte Povera of Giovanni Anselmo, Pier Paolo Calzolari, Jannis Kounellis, Mario Merz, and Gilberto Zorio in Europe and in New York. All of the other works, by artists from the United States, Europe and even Japan, are in diverse ways related to Italy. This may mean a Catholic-based tradition of Alpine handicraft in Jeff Koons's *Buster Keaton*, or Italian cuisine in works of Pop Art by Claes Oldenburg and James Rosenquist. Anselm Kiefer and Roy Lichtenstein have used motifs from Mediterranean classical architecture in contrasting ways. Italian topography attracted the eye, or better the camera lens, of several photographers, with results as divergent as the images by Lawrence Beck, Bernd and Hilla Becher, Elger Esser, David Hockney, Candida Höfer and Clay Ketter. The great traditions of Italian iconography are mined by Robert Feintuch, Philip Haas, Rona Pondick, Robert Rauschenberg, Cy Twombly and Wilhelm von Gloeden. Even literature finds its way into the exhibition—not just Dante Alighieri, but Fra Francesco Colonna's esoteric humanist book, the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, in works by Arman and Robert Morris respectively. Manipulations of Italian modernist painting (Balla), architecture (Sant'Elia), design (Alessi) and evocations of Roman archeological sites (by Gilbert & George and the Poiriers) all find their places in this exhibition. Given the depth and variety of such responses to Italy in the exhibition, the leitmotif becomes an *excursus*, exploring for us the different ways that Italian topography, culture and traditions continue to nourish contemporary art production. The diversity of artists and of generations in this exhibition also captures how steadfastly Ileana Sonnabend remained at the forefront of new art to the end of her life, promoting and encouraging young artists with her stamps of approval: exhibitions in one or more of her several galleries and a place in her personal collection. To paraphrase Leo Castelli's remark about Peggy, "Ileana was doing something of epoch-making importance."

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