

Making the invisible visible. Italics: Italian Art Between Tradition and Revolution 1968-2008

Natalia Nebel (December 25, 2009)



Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art and curator Francesco Bonami, with the collaboration of the Italian Cultural Institute of Chicago and its Director Tina Cervone, have given the American public the opportunity to view the works of Italy's most influential and exciting artists of the last forty years in an exhibition titled *Italics: Italian Art Between Tradition and Revolution 1968-2008*. (November 14 – February 14, 2010.) "*Italics*" is one of the largest exhibits ever organized in Chicago dedicated to contemporary Italian art.

The Italian Cultural Institute had the pleasure of hosting a conference with Francesco Bonami on the night before the show's opening. Curator Bonami spoke to an enthusiastic audience about the impact "*Italics*" is having on the art world, the reasons for the curatorial choices he made, as well as the particular problems that Italian artists have in breaking into the international art scene. Italian artists live in the shadow of Italy's artistic heritage because the focus of Italian government funding for the arts is dedicated to preserving the past, rather than supporting present day innovation.

"*Italics*" shines a spotlight on artists who haven't been recognized outside Italy, and although well known figures like Lucio Fontana, Alberto Burri, Carla Accardi, and Maurizio Cattelan are represented, there are many less familiar names, 70 artists in all. In Francesco Bonami's words, the work in "*Italics*" represents "a kind of suppressed contemporary civilization that has suddenly resurfaced."

The artwork is grouped thematically rather than chronologically, with rooms dedicated to portraiture, landscapes, social commentary, mortality, Italy's geography and Italian identity. I went on a tour of "*Italics*" guided by Tricia Van Eck, MCA Associate Curator. We began with Maurizio Cattelan's brilliant *All*. Made of Carrara marble, the piece consists of nine lifeless bodies that have been covered by white sheets. A memorial to people who have died sudden, violent deaths, its title reminds us that we are all mortal. Tricia Van Eck pointed out that *All* encapsulates many of the show's themes – martyrdom, Catholicism, death and transfiguration – while acknowledging artistic tradition in the choice of marble and the visual references to the Renaissance.



Maurizio Cattelan's All may be "Italics'" centerpiece, but many of the show's photographs, installations, sculptures and paintings are just as compelling. Mostly unknown in this country, they require only an engaged, curious spectator. One of my favorite works is titled Invisible, (1971) by Giovanni Anselmo. Consisting of a small projector in a gallery corner, if you take the time to step in front of it, the projector's shaft of light spells out the word, "visible," on your body. A metaphor for "Italics," in that Italian artists are finally being recognized, with help from the viewer. The invisible is made manifest.

The [Italian Cultural Institute of Chicago](http://www.iicchicago.org) [2] has an unprecedented opportunity to promote Italy and Italian culture in the United States thanks to "Italics," which was co-presented by Palazzo Grassi in Venice. In addition to promoting this exhibit, in January the MCA, with the partnership of the ICI, is sponsoring a film series featuring eight Italian movies from the 1970s, and a series of related workshops and seminars connected to this exhibit that shouldn't be missed.

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