



S A R A P I C C I N I N I

A R T I S T I C F A M I L Y A F F A I R S

The Collezione Maramotti is a project for contemporary art. His mentor, Achille Maramotti, founder of world-famous fashion house Max Mara, intended to establish a collection of contemporary art that would later become an exemplary place for aesthetic and intellectual enjoyment. The collection, based on Reggio Emilia (north of Italy), is open to the audience and it is a perfect mirror of the most advanced artistic ideas of its time. After paying it a visit, we interview Sara Piccinini, its senior coordinator.

I arrived in Reggio Emilia, a quiet, elegant and clean town full of classical squares and magnificent

hundred twenty artists represented. It is composed of pieces from the most significant artistic trends, mainly Italian and North American, from the second half of the 20th century.

I meet Sara Piccinini, the young and thoughtful senior coordinator of the collection, to talk about the history and principles of the collection, the thinking behind its first rehang and her views on art and society at large. And here is the result of a highly interesting conversation beyond what is a private collection of contemporary art.



Alessandro Pessoli. Fiamma pilota, 2011. Photo Fredrik Nilsen

Since when are you the senior coordinator of the collection?

I was appointed senior coordinator in January 2018, but I've been working at the collection for more than twelve years, starting with the former director, Marina Dacci. I clearly remember the collection's building under renovation, back in 2007, some months before its opening to the public. It was amazing to be there and see how everything took shape!

Achille Maramotti was a tireless art collector. Can you tell me about Achille and his fascinating story? When did he start collecting?

Achille Maramotti, who founded the Max Mara company in the 1950s, was a passionate collector and a painting enthusiast. He started to collect contemporary art early in the '60s and continued until his death, in 2005, mainly focusing on Italian art from the 1950s to the 1980s, then included also a lot of American art.

collection to the public was from Achille or from his descendants?

He conceived the idea of a collection open to the public in the 1970s, but he could not find the ideal place until Max Mara moved from its original building to a new venue. He wished to create an institution open to interested people, a place dedicated to an aesthetic and intellectual appreciation of art. Achille Maramotti did not see the opening of his collection, but his children carry on managing this place with the same philosophy.



Enoc Perez. Casa Malaparte (Day), 2008. Photo Carlo Vannini

When did the collection first open to the public? And where were these works displayed previously?

The collection opened to the public in October 2007. Most of the works were in storage, archived inside their crates, but some of them were displayed in the corridors, offices and common spaces of Max Mara, to offer fruitful inspiration for designers and creative people working there. This being said, Achille Maramotti believed that art and fashion were two different languages with distinct features and goals. The artistic gesture and the works of art are an end in themselves, regardless of a potential buyer; while fashion, as exclusive as it may be, only exists because a user, someone who will wear it, exists.

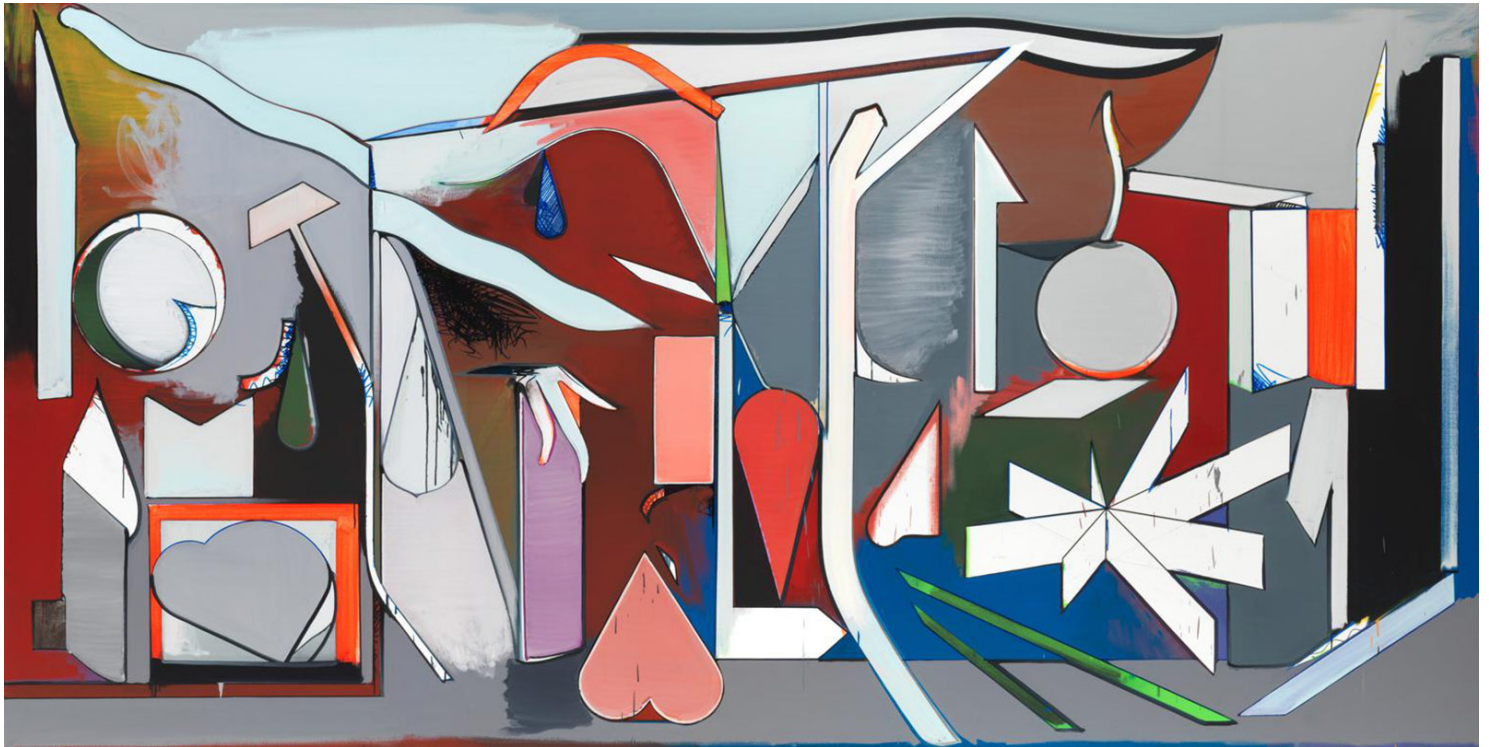
Interesting reflexion, at least related to the idea of contemporary art and the autonomy of art. The home of the collection is the former Max Mara headquarters, which has been restored. The building is an extraordinary example of modern architecture and design, a gorgeous, multistorey, concrete and glass structure. Could you please tell us a bit about the story of the building?

for the time, it is a great example of brutalist architecture, in which the béton brut structure offers an expressive force and a clean solidity, while the large and numerous windows allow the building to take maximum advantage of the natural light.

In 2003, Max Mara moved to the new headquarters in the north part of the town and the building was converted into an exhibition space by architect Andrew Hapgood. His work respected the original design, preserving its crude simplicity, its versatility and, in the end, the history of the building's past. Even the original tiles, with their stains and marks, have been recovered and still remember our visitors that this was a workplace, full of people, stories, and experiences for almost fifty years.

Indeed, it is a place full of spirit. The collection mainly focused on painting, mostly Italian from the 1950s to the present day, although there are also installation works and sculptures. Was painting the favourite medium of Achille?

Yes, he considered painting like an ongoing discourse from antiquity to the present day.



Thomas Scheibitz. ECLECTICA, 2009. Photo Jens Ziehe

Which were the first purchases he made?

The path of the permanent exhibition follows a chronological order in terms of production but also of acquisition of the works. Achille Maramotti followed the artistic research of his peers, and mostly from their early careers, when their work first brought elements of true innovation into the contemporary art scene. In the first two rooms of the collection, you find pieces by Alberto Burri, Jean Fautrier, Francis Bacon, Lucio Fontana, Osvaldo Licini, Jannis Kounellis, Piero Manzoni, etc.

The permanent collection exhibition on the first floor includes an impressive and significant body of Italian painting as well as a good deal of American art. A walk to remember western art history from the 1950s to the 1980s. By observing his choices, as you said, it seems he was following what was happening at his time: Abstract Expressionist movements of the 1950s, Italian Pop Art of the 1960s, Arte Povera in the 1970s, and

The rooms represent a kind of dialogue between Italy and the USA. Why was he so interested in collecting North American artists?

As he was particularly interested in the development of painting, after the 1980s and the Italian Transavanguardia, he could not find such a strong scene related to this medium in his country. So he turned his eye toward Germany and the United States, where painting was also flourishing again thanks to Neo-expressionism, but also in the following years through New Geometry, Appropriation Art and other further experimentations.

A daring man without a doubt; being interested in experimentation denotes openness. During the tour, the guide explained that one of the spaces was created exclusively for Parmiggiani's work *Caspar David Friedrich* (1989), the enormous, black boat suspended in the air. Does it mean that this installation will be also always there?

I definitely think so! That's right, this big high space was created for this extraordinary work, which is kind of central in the exhibition. You may see it from the first floor and also from the second, which offers experiencing the artwork from different points of view. It's very lyrical, it takes you into a metaphysical dimension and through a spiritual journey.

“A change of gaze corresponds with a shift of thought: I think this is the base for a revolutionary approach towards the world.”



Let me ask you something. Being Spanish myself and having in Spain a huge Art Informel body of work – Abstract Expressionism – with two main groups, Dau al Set in Catalonia, whose most known representative Antoni Tàpies is very close to Arte Povera; and then the Madrid group El Paso, with Antonio Saura as a real representative of Neo-expressionism. I think there was a dialogue between Spain and Italy at that time, basically for its geographical proximity. I was wondering why there aren't any Spanish artists in the collection.

I am not sure I have the right answer to this question. I think that collecting, in its purest form, has a lot to do with a continuous discovery through connections and encounters, with the creation of a map of affinities supported by a personal vision and taste. I guess that after the exploration of the art scene in Italy, the collector was just more oriented and stimulated to what was happening in the United States than in Europe. Actually, we have a few important works from the German Neo-expressionism on display, but they're quite the only examples of neither Italian nor American pieces in the collection of Achille Maramotti.

Understand your point, it was not a critique. Just a curiosity. Going back to organization questions, after Achille, his progeny are taking care of the collection and continuing the patronage and collecting tasks that their father started, right?

Right, the passion for art, and especially contemporary art, is deeply felt in the family.

Yes, the evolution of painting is still the main focus. But in recent years, we've also presented different kinds of projects, including photography, installations, sculptures, etc. Mostly, they were connected to the Fotografia Europea Festival and the Max Mara Art Prize for Women. The first one takes place in Reggio Emilia every year in the springtime; the collection is in the festival's network, so on those occasions, we try to propose photo exhibitions or projects matching with the festival's theme. For example, now we have *The fountains of Za'atari* by Margherita Moscardini on display, which is not a photography or a painting show, but it definitely fits the Bonding. Intimacy, Relationships, New worlds theme of the festival.

The Max Mara Art Prize for Women, in collaboration with Whitechapel Gallery, allows the winning artists to develop a new project in complete freedom with any media. Laure Prouvost and Corin Sworn realized huge installations which included objects and videos. Emma Hart also created a big installation centred around her new ceramic experimentations. Helen Cammock – winner of the current edition of the Prize and just shortlisted for the 2019 Turner Prize – is working with performance, video, and an artist's book. Every time, it's something very different and personal to each artist.



Jules de Balincourt. Waiting Tree, 2012. Photo Joseph Desler Costa

the second floor, which is what we can see now. It is the first time the permanent display has changed since it opened?

Very few works have been changed throughout the years (three big paintings by Margherita Manzelli on the first floor instead of Nunzio and Pizzi Cannella), but this is the first time we have changed many entire rooms in the permanent exhibition, conceiving it as a real ‘rehang’ and an update on our activity.

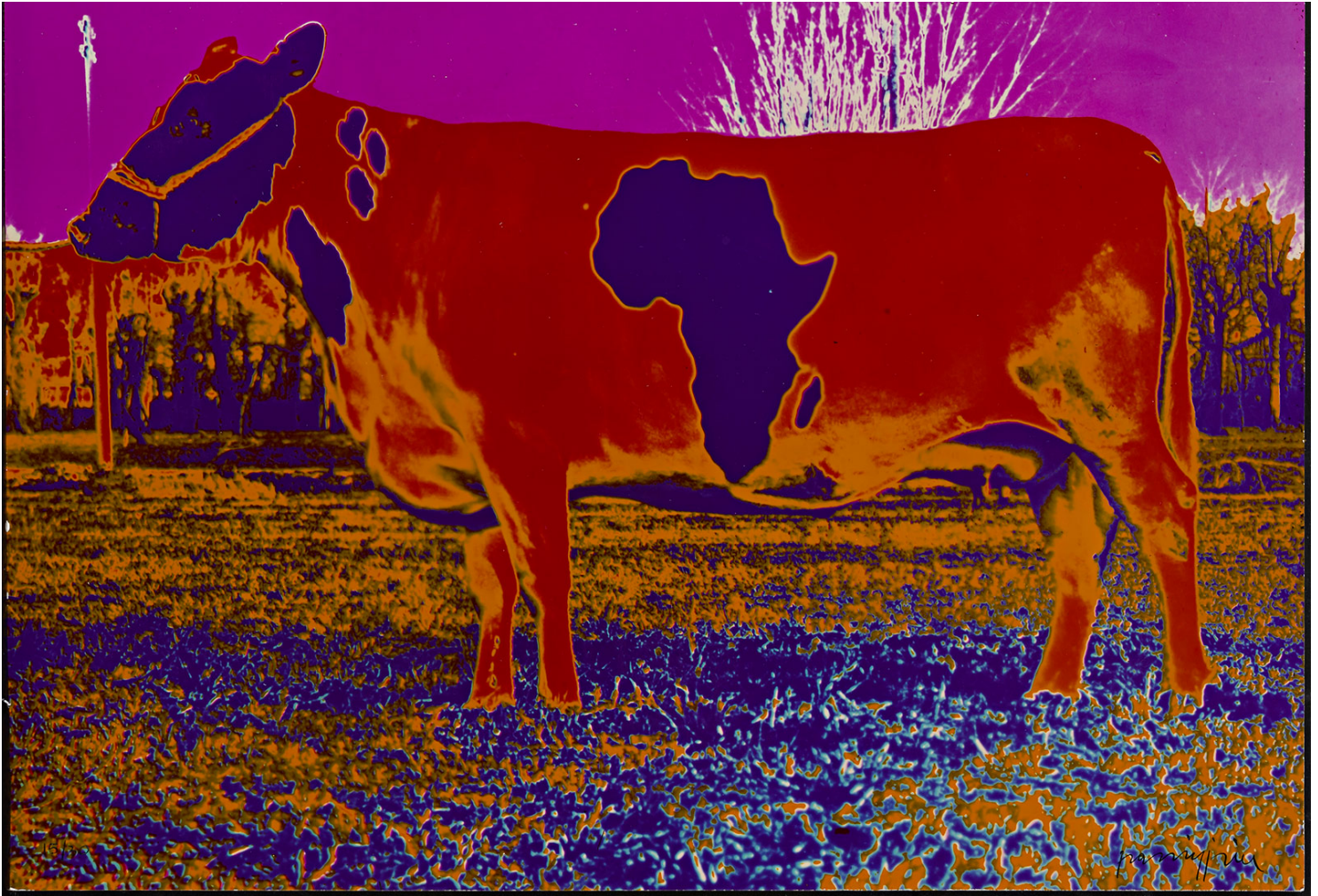
What is the thinking behind the Rehang? What is the curatorial reasoning for this solution?

This *Rehang* has come from the desire to offer an overview on the many years of progress in the work of the Collezione Maramotti, during which we have presented more than thirty new projects, and from these, many works have entered the collection. We felt that an update, displaying again a number of our latest works, would be a positive moment for a reflection on the collection and its ongoing development. These ten projects (by Enoc Perez, Gert & Uwe Tobias, Jacob Kassay, Krištof Kintera, Jules de Balincourt, Alessandro Pessoli, Evgeny Antufiev, Thomas Scheibitz, Chantal Joffe and Alessandra Ariatti) were already, from 2008 to 2017, on temporary display, so in a way, it is like re-staging a part of our recent history in a permanent form – or semi-permanent: I can’t exclude the possibility of presenting a new update in some years time.

In this new setup, there are two huge sculptural installations by Czech artist Kintera and Russian Antufiev. Was it difficult to approach this change of media?

I’d rather define them as fun and challenging, especially when they were first produced and presented here in all their complexity. Evgeny Antufiev occupied a six-room space in 2013 and crowded it with objects and materials, from bones to meteorites, to wood and fabric puppets and even fake and real crystals. He worked one year on that exhibition and did a two-month residency in Reggio Emilia to finish the work’s production and to install the project. It was a very intense experience for him and for us. He has now conceived an abstract of his show to fit in one room on the second floor of the collection.

Krištof Kintera also made a huge work for his *Postnaturalia* in 2017 with the collaboration of artist friends Richard Wiesner and Rastislav Juhás. He ‘occupied’ two large galleries of the collection and our entrance corridor with sculptures, a large floor level installation – a synthetic vegetal carpet made of cables, wires and technological wastes – and the reproduction of his messy and full-of-energy studio in Prague. The artist and his assistants came back last February to take care personally of the new ‘reduced’ installation.



Photographic work from the artist's book *Tavole Zoogeografiche* by Claudio Parmiggiani. 1973

Going back to local artists like painter Alessandra Ariatti. Her hyperrealist precise portraits are located next to well-known – also female – painter Chantal Joffe. However, they have a very different style and approach to painting. Is that to reinforce the differences? Or maybe there are similitudes I could not see?

You caught exactly the sense of these rooms closing the permanent exhibition. The shows *Legami* by Alessandra Ariatti and *Moll* by Chantal Joffe were presented together in two contiguous rooms under the title *Ritratto di donne [Portraits of Women]* in 2014. In their very different styles, they both are women focusing their artistic research on portraiture and, for this specific occasion, on portraying other women. Joffe represented almost obsessively her teenage niece with loose and quick brush strokes, blurring the details of the face, dresses and setting into a single pictorial flow; Ariatti paints groups of figures with a hyper-photographic precision, highlighting the relationship between the subjects, the subjects' relationships with her, and also with the viewer. It was (and I think it still is) an interesting dialogue.

Along with the *Rehang*, on the ground floor, you're also staging an exhibition of archival material: photographs, letters, sketches, videos, and models, as well as books. How did the idea for this develop? There are also ten artists in this archival exhibition – not the same ones though. Who are they and what is the criteria for this selection?

Rehang: Archives, in our early idea, was a small exhibition with rare and artist's books from our library. Then, this idea has rapidly evolved and became a four-room exhibition presenting elements from all of our archives – books, but also documents and artworks. Claudio Parmiggiani, Peter Halley, Barry X Ball, Jason

abundance of available materials related to the creation process of their works.

The show is a path through the constellations of elements turning around the artwork: inspirations, roots, the work before its creation, etc. But also after: their 'public life', their proliferations. It's a sort of 'backstage' of the works and an interesting way to highlight the connections between the various objects which form the collection.

I like this concept of 'backstage of an artwork'. Another important activity in support of creation for the Collezione Maramotti is the Max Mara Art Prize For Women, which you mentioned a bit ago, in collaboration with London's Whitechapel Gallery. How did this collaboration start? Why only artists – although they do not need to be British – based in the United Kingdom?

The Max Mara Art Prize for Women started in 2005 as a collaboration between Max Mara and the Whitechapel Gallery, one of the major British art institutions, which premiered many women artists throughout its history. The Prize reflects Max Mara's close relationship with the worlds both of women and of art. The Collezione Maramotti entered as the third partner in 2007. The Prize aims to encourage emerging women artists who live and work in the United Kingdom, still considered one of the centres of the international art scene.

The winner is provided with the opportunity to further develop her creative potential. She does a six-month residency in Italy and creates a new artwork, which is then shown at the Whitechapel and at the Collezione Maramotti, which also acquires it. So, it's a huge project in which the most important thing is maybe the gift of time, as the artist may spend several months just concentrating on her work, free to explore what she's most interested in and with all the support she needs to do it.



Krištof Kintera. Systemus Postnaturalis, 2016

In these times of increasing visibility of feminist movements, the eruption of #metoo followed by many other manifestations in defence of female and queer rights, how important is to reflect this in the Maramotti collection?

I would like to underline that recently, a significant number of temporary shows presented at the collection were by women artists, and there are more forthcoming: Phoebe Unwin and Sally Ross in 2018; Margherita Moscardini, Helen Cammock and Mona Osman in 2019; Svenja Deininger in 2020. I don't see a direct link between the recent manifestations in defence of female and queer rights and the choices of the Maramotti family about the artists to invite, but of course, I think that the more and more substantial presence of women artists in the collection reflects their increasing recognition in the art world in general.

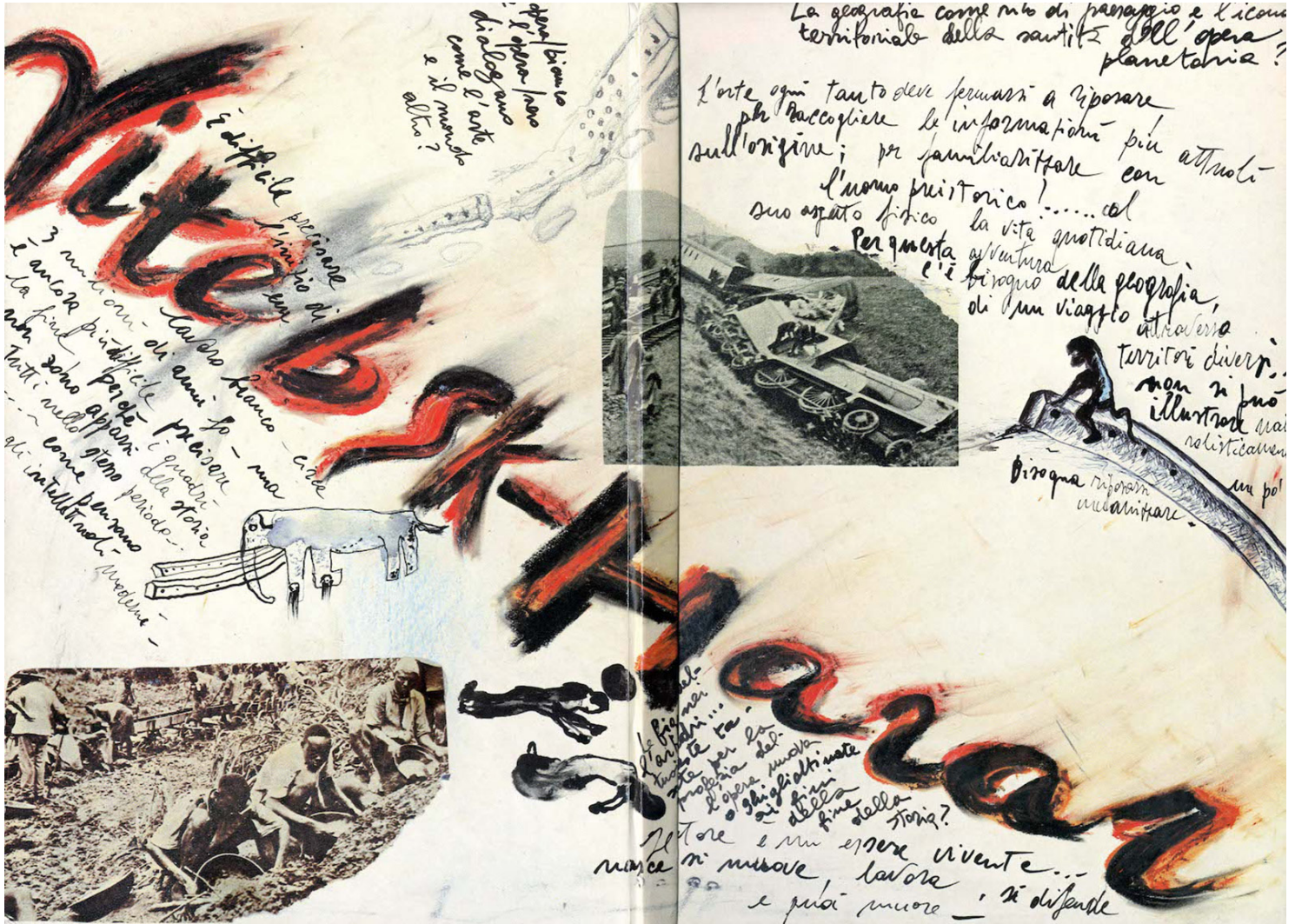
Apart from some individual issues, there is not much of 'literal' political art in the collection. However, the temporary exhibition by Margherita Moscardini, *The Fountains of Za'atari*, based on research into refugee camps as urban spaces destined to last, is highly political. Could you please comment a bit on this?

Actually, I think that there are several political pieces in the collection – think about the works by Cady Noland, Ellen Gallagher, Rosemarie Trockel, A.R. Penck, Jörg Immendorff, Tom Sachs, Krištof Kintera, etc. Maybe painting itself can be considered a political act, especially nowadays. And being an artist, in a way, is a political act as well. But I see what you mean. Besides painting, the Maramotti family shows an attention to new languages and projects questioning the role of art and artists today: what's the meaning of the artistic

The collaboration with Margherita Moscardini is an example of that kind of commitment. It started with her proposal to make an artist's book supported by the collection, and has developed into a temporary show, a permanent public sculpture-fountain and will go further with the publication of the book later this year.

Based on what criteria are the temporary exhibitions chosen?

We mainly present new projects and commissions for emergent and mid-career artists. The Maramotti family personally chooses the artists to invite. It's their taste and it's consistent with the collection's identity. Sometimes, we also organize theme-based shows with works from our storage.



Cover of the artist's book *Vitebsk/Harar* by Enzo Cucchi. 1984

You did comment during my visit that there is a cooperative that was created thanks to the involvement of artists working in the Maramotti Collection. Can you explain a bit more this project?

The Atelier dell'Errore Big is an advanced school of the visual arts founded in 2015 as an outgrowth of the Atelier dell'Errore, a visual arts workshop serving young people in neuropsychiatric care. Since its foundation, the Atelier dell'Errore Big has been hosted by the Collezione Maramotti. Several major projects have grown out of the collaboration with the Collezione Maramotti and Max Mara: *Uomini come cibo* (2015), a large-scale exhibition that occupied all five floors of a historic palazzo in Milan during Expo 2015; *The Guardian Animals + Other Invisible Beings* (2016), an exhibition at Moretti Gallery organized for Frieze

Big to the public during the Fotografia Europea Festival. In recent years, they also made performances. It's really a terrific project. The Atelier became a cooperative some months ago, the young artists are now members and so they are 'real' professionals.

This is a marvellous project. And from art and society to art and business, did the art collection have an influence on the Max Mara fashion house or vice versa?

Not really. We are not a corporate collection but the private collection of the family who founded Max Mara. Of course, we collaborate with the company in many ways, for the Max Mara Art Prize, for example.

I see. According to the previous answers, especially the refugees, the cooperative, how do you think art influences other disciplines, society and life in general (both individual and in common)? Do think art can be a wick that lights change in societal issues?

I think art is a powerful language with a potentially deflagrating force. Art may change ourselves as individuals and as a community. The artist's eye may intercept and enlighten what is not so evident in the present and suggest a different vision towards the future. I believe that is true for all kinds of art, no matter what medium, no matter what subject. An artwork may question our way of thinking, inspire new thoughts and actions, activate our minds and emotions, overlaying an additional layer of perception onto reality. A change of gaze corresponds with a shift of thought: I think this is the base for a revolutionary approach towards the world.



Evgeny Antufiev. From the exhibition Twelve, wood, dolphin, knife, bowl, mask, crystal, bones and marble – fusion. Exploring materials, 2013. Collezione Maramotti, Reggio Emilia, 2019. Photo: Dario Lasagni