

TWO'S COMPANY

"For a long time, I thought that having a relationship with somebody who's in the same business was not going to work," says Gioni, "but with Cecilia it turned out to work perfectly." On Gioni: Trussardi leather jacket. On Alemani: Doo.Ri dress. Marni necklace. Hair, Teddy Charles for Orlo Salon; makeup, Brigitte Reiss-Andersen. Details, see In This Issue.

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A LOVE AFFAIR WITH ART

The charming, ubiquitous—and extremely busy—Italian curators Massimiliano Gioni and Cecilia Alemani are the art world's new It couple. Dodie Kazanjian reports. Photographed by Norman Jean Roy.

It's 4:30 on a February afternoon, and Massimiliano Gioni hasn't had lunch yet. Looking more like an artist (bright-red sneakers, black peacoat, tight black jeans) than the associate director and chief curator of New York's New Museum of contemporary art, he's been up since six, writing a catalog essay, planning shows here and abroad, talking on his two cell phones (a smart phone and an older, "dumb" one), and being interviewed by reporters left and right. The interviews are about his recent appointment as director of the 2013 Venice Biennale, the oldest and most important of the great international art shows—a plum job with enormous clout in the global art world. This past weekend, he went on a "retreat" with his wife, Cecilia Alemani, an independent curator who runs the art program on the High Line and who is also in the thick of organizing a series of special projects for the much-anticipated Frieze Art Fair this month on New York's Randall's Island.

Their first thought was to go somewhere upstate, but since they travel all the time, they decided instead to go to the new Standard, East Village hotel, a block and a half from where they live. It's hard to think of two people more in need of a retreat—during the previous week, he was in Mumbai, London, and Doha, where he installed a giant Murakami exhibition, and she was visiting artists' studios in three cities in Colombia—but they spent their two days brainstorming about Gioni's plans for the Biennale.

"Massimiliano is one of the small number of unique people who are helping to reinvent contemporary art for the next generation," says Jeffrey Deitch, the director of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. "He is the curatorial equivalent of one of the great international orchestra conductors." Francesco Bonami, the highly influential independent curator who has been something of a mentor to both Massimiliano and Cecilia, says, "Massimiliano has an encyclopedic knowledge that goes beyond the arts. Cecilia is as much a producer as a curator. She knows how to find the right project for the right place. She's more of a silent risk-taker than Massimiliano and less of a diplomat. I envy them immensely because they have this new energy to run fast, but when they score, I get a vicarious boost—they function a little like curatorial Viagra for me."

In almost no time at all, Massimiliano and Cecilia have

become the art world's newest dynamic duo. He is 38, she is 35—her birthday came and went while they were an ocean apart. He likes art that's "more aggressive and slightly annoying," as he tells me. "I think art has to be a bit of an obstacle." Cecilia, who is working with a much larger, non-art audience on the High Line, manages to present advanced art in ways that minimize the obstacles. They got married a little more than a year ago, at City Hall, and two weeks later took over their local Chinese restaurant, the Grand Sichuan on St. Mark's Place, with about 70 friends (including many artists) for a celebratory dinner, with music by a strolling mariachi band. But five months elapsed before they could fit in a honeymoon—ten fabulous days in Turks and Caicos.

Over a micro-sandwich at Bar Pleiades on the Upper East Side, Massimiliano tells me that in spite of their constant travels, they're together a lot and never out of touch. "We're always testing ideas on each other," he says. "We are very different people with very different tastes and agendas. For a long time, I thought that having a relationship with somebody who's in the same business was not going to work, but with Cecilia it turned out to work perfectly." The espresso that he ordered 40 minutes ago finally arrives, and the waitress apologizes for the delay. "It must be very concentrated," he quips, and we all crack up.

I catch up with him again a week later at the Armory Show, a two-ring circus that fills Piers 92 and 94 on the Hudson. Half the international art world is in New York this week—artists, collectors, gallerists, critics, and curators—and a good part of it wants a piece of Massimiliano and/or Cecilia (she was supposed to be here, but she's stuck in meetings downtown). They're in demand for artists' openings, dinners, and after-dinner parties every night. Usually, they try to save one night a week to see a movie or to stay home by themselves, catching up on reading, but not this week. Today Massimiliano can't take three steps without being accosted. "I'm going to be nice to you. I'm going to be *super* nice to you for the next year," David Zwirner, one of New York's most high-powered dealers, tells Massimiliano, referring to his Venice appointment. "Do I have an expiration date on me?" Massimiliano shoots back, with a hearty laugh. He moves through the crowd with ease, shaking hands, making jokes. "Working with Massimiliano," the artist Paul Chan told me, "you quickly realize that he seems to be joking when he's serious, and serious when he's joking. There's a topsy-turvy quality to him that makes him agreeably unpredictable."

Surrounded by acres of new art, Massimiliano snatches a moment to voice one of his anxieties about the Biennale job. "People are getting allergic to quantity in biennials," he says. "But scaling things down is too easy and too predictable. The challenge is, how do you deal with quantity in general? And how do you deal with artists who are financially successful, because now there's a perception that anybody who's successful is suspect? I don't have the answer." Maybe not yet, but judging from his record, he's likely to have it before long.

When I visit Cecilia in their East Village walk-up a few days later, I am struck, as usual, by her height (five feet eleven inches) and her radiant, welcoming smile. A vivid presence in her

SEEING GREEN

The First \$100,000 I Ever Made, 2011, by John Baldessari. Appointed the Donald R. Mullen, Jr., director of High Line Art last fall, Alemani installed it as part of a rotating exhibition on a billboard at West 18th Street.



The First \$100,000 I Ever Made, 2011: JOHN BALDESSARI; print on vinyl, 25' x 75'. Installation view from the High Line at West 18th Street, NYC; Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York; photographed by Bill Orcutt.

dark, full skirt by Marni with over-the-knee black boots, she leads me through the sparsely furnished living room and into the study, where Massimiliano is waiting for us on her computer screen, via Skype. "Ciao, Dodie," he calls out. Massimiliano is in Milan, where he proceeds to show me their other apartment. "This is our posh home, compared to the New York place," he says, laughing. It's a floor in a house that belonged to Cecilia's maternal grandparents—the pink-and-green, modernist bedroom furniture was designed for her grandmother in the 1930s by her great uncle, a well-known Italian architect named Lodovico Barbiano di Belgiojoso. Cecilia grew up in a small town 25 kilometers from Milan, in an eighteenth-century villa that had been in the family for generations. (Massimiliano also grew up outside Milan, in a much larger industrial town, where his father worked in an ink factory.) It's 10:00 P.M. in Italy, and Massimiliano, who of course hasn't had dinner yet, leaves us to go out and grab a pizza.

I've noticed that both apartments have scads of crowded bookcases, but little or no art on the walls. "We don't hang things," Cecilia says. "I always liked white walls—maybe because of growing up in such an old house with so much stuff. And in the art world, where you go to galleries all the time, it's refreshing to come home and not see anything."

Cecilia and Massimiliano met nine years ago at the opening of Massimiliano's first exhibition as newly named director of the Nicola Trussardi Foundation, a nonprofit, nomadic museum in Milan. She left for the U.S. soon afterward, to get her master's degree in the Curatorial Studies program at Bard College. Looking for a summer internship the following spring, she saw that Massimiliano was curating "Manifesta5," the big European biennial in San Sebastián, Spain. "I wrote him an e-mail saying, 'Hi, do you remember me? I'm studying to become a curator. Can I do an internship with you?'" He said yes, and before the summer was out, Massimiliano had broken up with his former girlfriend, and he and Cecilia were a couple. Since then, their art-world careers have followed parallel but not always intersecting tracks. After graduating from Bard in 2005, she wrote short reviews for Artforum.com and worked with Bonami on two big touring exhibitions. "I wanted to travel a lot and not be tied down to a desk," she tells me.

Her first big break came in January 2009, when she was appointed director and curator of X Initiative, the nonprofit art consortium that put on a one-year program of exhibitions, performances, lectures, and screenings in the former Dia Center for the Arts space on West Twenty-second Street. Working with a very tight budget, Cecilia put on eye-catching shows, which introduced a lot of young, emerging artists from around the world, and also a host of forgotten or underappreciated older artists. "What she achieved with X Initiative was remarkable," says Amanda Sharp, cofounder of *Frieze* magazine and the Frieze Art Fair. "She brought the best of European attitudes to what at times can be a very provincial New York."

Massimiliano's own trajectory since graduating from the University of Bologna in 1997 has been meteoric. As the editor of *Flash Art*, first in Milan and two years later in New



BIG IDEAS

Gioni gained international notice with exhibits such as *Balloon*, 1999–2007, by Paweł Althamer, a blow-up self-portrait that hovered above Milan for the Nicola Trussardi Foundation, 2007.

York, he met and impressed countless art-world players, and became a collaborator and occasional alter ego for the rising Italian conceptual artist Maurizio Cattelan. They went on to collaborate on many provocations, including the Wrong Gallery, with Ali Subotnick, a closet-size exhibition space behind a non-opening glass door on West Twentieth Street in Chelsea (artist Adam McEwen's show there consisted of a sign reading "FUCK OFF WE'RE CLOSED"); the pseudo "Gagosian Gallery" in Berlin, which somewhat irritated the owner of the real thing; and the Wrong Gallery's recent successor, a slightly larger space (next to Gagosian's outpost on West Twenty-first Street) with a working door, called Family Business. "I'm always surprised by Massimiliano," Cattelan tells me. "There's no end to him."

Massimiliano's shows at the Nicola Trussardi Foundation—such as Polish artist Paweł Althamer's self-portrait in the form of a nude, 70-foot-long helium balloon floating over Milan—gained him recognition as a cutting-edge, controversial, and brilliantly innovative curator. He was soon operating on an international scale, curating biennials in Berlin and Gwangju, South Korea, and mounting a series of incisive monographic shows at the New Museum (Urs Fischer, Carsten Höller, Paul Chan, Tacita Dean) interspersed with startling and sometimes harrowing theme shows ("After Nature," "Younger Than Jesus," "Ostalgia," and the upcoming "Ghosts in the Machine"). Speaking of Massimiliano, Dean says, "He's a bit of a whirlwind, but his center is still, and he has a romantic heart."

Sitting at a table in their apartment, Cecilia and I talk about her current projects. She is in the midst of planning the High Line's 2012 art season, which is guaranteed a blockbuster audience—nearly six million people visited the site in its first two years. Her program includes temporary use (on alternate months) of the 25-by-75-foot billboard on West Eighteenth Street. Following up her installation of John Baldessari's confrontational blow-up of a \$100,000 bill last December, at the height of the Occupy Wall Street movement, her current display is a black-and-white image of three cartoony, angst-ridden thought bubbles by (continued on page 308)

Balloon, 1999–2007: PAWEŁ ALTHAMER; nylon, polyester, acrylic, ropes, helium, 2,100 x 617 x 866 cm; commissioned and produced by Fondazione Nicola Trussardi, Milano; photographed by Cecilia Alemani/Courtesy of Paweł Althamer, Neugeremtschneider, Berlin; Folsal Gallery, Warsaw.

David Shrigley, the Glasgow-based artist. She's also preparing the High Line's first group show, to open April 19. "Everyone was asking me what will be the first big bronze sculpture on the High Line," she says, "because they associate public art with corporate plaza sculptures." Instead of big, she's organizing a group of small sculptures by six emerging artists, and calling it "Lilliput," after *Gulliver's Travels*.

At the same time, she's putting together the commissioned program for Frieze, the inaugural New York appearance of London's wildly popular annual art fair. As one of her eight artist projects, she invited the novelist Rick Moody to write something about Randall's Island, and what he came up with is an undependable GPS, with literal instructions that don't get you there—in fact, they're guaranteed to get you lost.

Massimiliano is back on Skype, sitting on a maroon sofa among the remains of his *pizza con prosciutto cotto*. An off-camera "ping" announces that he's having another beer. It's nearly midnight in Milan, but in New York, where it's six hours earlier, Cecilia is running off to visit an artist's studio in Greenpoint, Brooklyn. "It's not so great, communicating this way," he says. "But then we always work—which is good, but it's also bad." They say good night the modern way, with a discreet kiss on their computer screens. □