TAKING OVER MILAN'S FASHION SCENE WITH ART

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When contemporary art takes over fashion real estate in Milan--an interview with architect, collector, and design consultant Nicole Saikalis Bay.

T he fashion industry had a hard time during the pandemic. With people staying at home and international tourists not traveling, many fashion brands suffered a drop in high-street retail demand forcing them to reduce costs by terminating rental contracts for their outlets in major fashion districts. Sadly, this has also been the case of Milan's sophisticated "Quadrilatero della Moda" – a mecca for fashion-addicts from all over the world coming to Milan also for its internationally renowned fashion industry.
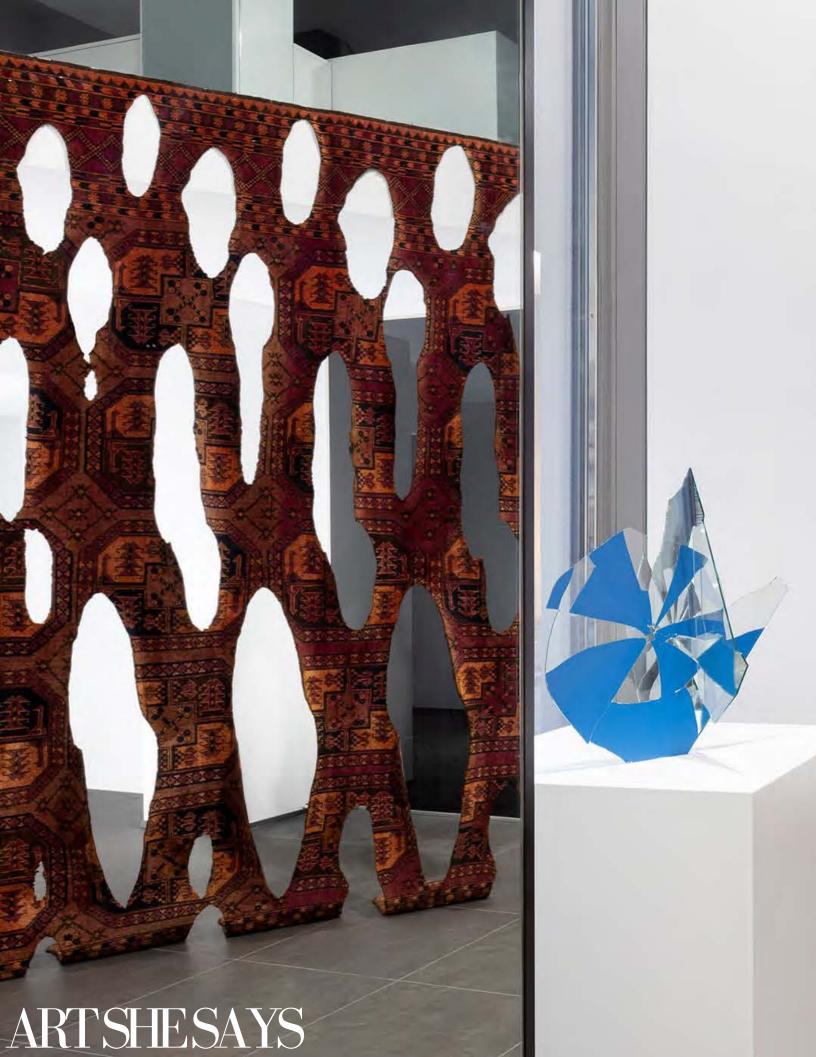
But now, a great project named Art Takes Over, is trying to revitalize those spaces that remained empty, "taking them over" with art. We spoke with architect, collector and design consultant Nicole Saikalis Bay, who launched this initiative, now at its second edition.

How would you describe this project and why did you decide to carry out a "take over" in this specific area of Milan?

I am an architect with a special interest in urbanism and urban regeneration. I am also an art collector with a passion for contemporary art. With *Art Takes Over* I combined these two interests!

Art Takes Over is a private project based on the direct collaboration between landlords who own currently vacant commercial spaces and the best Milanese art galleries. As an art collector, over the years I had developed close relationships with the galleries. When I contacted them to see whether they had an interest for the project, they all adhered with enthusiasm and such a strong energy. They were key for the success of the project. We studied together which artists and which works would best fit in the available storefronts. Landlords have been also strong supporters of the initiative including by offering a significant amount of their personal time.

We saw how the pandemic and the lockdowns had a dramatic effect on foot traffic and retail commerce, with a significant number of store closures. We live in the Quadrilatero, where there is little else beyond fashion stores, and the brands of smaller companies were hit the hardest.

When fashion brands vacated the boutiques, we had the idea of exploiting the empty spaces, by filling them with contemporary art.

Would you define it as a project of urban regeneration with art? What is the main goal?

Indeed, Art Takes Over is a project of urban regeneration project aimed at revitalizing and enhancing spaces affected by Covid-19 through art and creativity. The transformative moment of art taking over commercial spaces is meant to show people the power that art can have on a streetscape.

We wanted to fill the void created by the pandemic with contemporary art installations to enhance and add value to the spaces to rent while giving life and light back to the street. And eventually along the way to create an opportunity for change, to give back to this neighborhood its original identity.

Those who lived in this part of the Quadrilatero 50 years ago, recall having plenty of local retail shops, such as bakeries, bars, groceries, a stationary shop, restaurants. It was like a little village, with an atmosphere from the middle ages due to the street's irregular snakelike shape and the large cobblestones on the pavement.

Well known as part of the "Quadrilatero della Moda", Via della Spiga is a street in constant evolution, its story filled with contrasting experiences and longstanding connections to the art world.

Inspired by the successful transformation of the high-street empty storefronts in major cities worldwide at times of economic crisis, Art Takes Over aims to encourage a new renaissance by creating a meeting ground between contemporary art and the wider public. Tourists, passersby and especially art aficionados are indeed attracted by these alternative art itineraries.

We hope that this unconventional art project will become a concrete part of the area's requalification. Its aim is also to bring a message of dynamism and hope while we are all looking forward to a "new normal" in every day's life.

Using contemporary art to fill vacant store fronts is a trend that started internationally following the 2008 economic crisis and gradually expanded over the years in several cities - New York, Chicago, Seattle, San Francisco, Minneapolis and London among others. At present, there are several ongoing initiatives, for instance Rebound-NYC, a series of exhibitions curated by the EcoArt Project in New York, and Storefront Art Project curated by the Southampton Arts Center.

You told us that, between the late 18th century and the first half of the 20th century, the "Quadrilatero" was a cradle for generations of artists, poets, intellectuals and revolutionaries. Could you tell us some more?

Starting in the late 19th century and through the late 1950s/1960s numerous art galleries opened in what is now known as the "Quadrilatero della Moda" (the Fashion District) of Milan, in Via della Spiga, Via Montenapoleone, Via Santo Spirito, Corso Littorio (now Corso Matteotti), Via Manzoni, Via Sant'Andrea, and more.

The seeds of the contemporary art's presence in Milan were laid down through the creation in 1869 of the Esposizione Permanente di Belle Arti, with the objective of promoting public exhibitions of contemporary art, and in 1873 of the Famiglia Artistica Milanese, a self-managed partnership of artists, including the Scapigliati (unkempt, disheveled), a bohemian movement that wanted to bring together art and the public, and wished that the bourgeosie be involved in the nascent Italian artistic life. The Scapigliati, in particular, elected the area now comprising the Quadrilatero as their meeting point, with parks, bars and little restaurants as their natural forum for discussions and congregations.

For the first series of site-specific installations, *Art Takes Over* featured two female artists, Monica Bonvicini and Marina Abramovich, and you have collaborated with the female owners of leading art galleries, Galleria Raffaella Cortese, Galleria Lia Rumma and Galleria Francesca Minini. You now have just opened the second edition, featuring female artists: Judith Hopf and Kerstin Brätsch. Was it casual, or is it part of a strategic choice aiming to specifically provide opportunities to women?

I am myself a woman who found her way in the architectural world. When I was twenty five, I started my architectural practice in London, where I worked for close to twenty years. I was always encouraged by my family not to feel different, to always be equal to my brothers. As a result, I have never considered men and women to be different in any walk of life.

As regards Art Takes Over, it was not initially intended to give a preference to female artists. However as for our private art collection, we do like to give a priority to women artists when it is possible, as they are often undervalued or under estimated. Ultimately, with Art Takes Over our choice, together with the art galleries we involved, was mainly guided by the significance of an individual work or a series of works in the context of an artist's overall career.

Actually, I do think that sometimes women tend to show more strength to achieve an objective or to pursue an endeavor. This strength and the underlying dynamism of the artists we worked with was an important part of the revitalization message we wished to give in a post-pandemic world.

And I am convinced that women artists tend to show more sensitivity towards certain subjects. It shows in their art work, where they explore issues including body image, sexual identity, gender stereotyping, prejudice and the abuse of power. All these are subjects that lend themselves particularly well when the art works are on display for the general public. Though, most of the people passing by in front of the store windows may have never visited a contemporary art gallery, the choices of art works we made have been particularly welcome and generated a genuine interest.

After the first edition, and while opening the second one, how do you see the outcome of the initiative? What worked, what didn't work and what you'd like to improve for the future ones?

The initiative has generated a lot of interest in the art collector community, among art galleries, and also in terms of press and media attention. And this has been only the result of a close collaboration between the landlords and the galleries involved. The most revealing aspect for me of working together with the art galleries has been the strong sense of collaborating together for a public interest project. The experience has been particularly enriching as I discovered in the owners and directors of the art galleries traits that I had never had the chance to explore so deeply, all this through the numerous interactions from the practical and more mundane, to the philosophical and most intellectual ones.

Following the success of the first edition of art installations in vacant storefronts in Milan's fashion luxury district in spring 2021, Art Takes Over is pleased to present the second edition of its program which presents a duo of German artists, Kerstin Brätsch (Hamburg, 1979) and Judith Hopf (Karlsruhe, 1969). Both interested in the critical scrutiny of the contemporary digital dependence, their works encompass painting, sculpture and installation. Brätsch's and Hopf's installations will be on view till the end of September, offering Milanese and foreign visitors the opportunity for a walk in Milan's historical city center while enjoying the unexpected view of contemporary art installations.

And you, as also a woman collector, how did you start collecting? You share this passion with your husband: how do you manage it, do you share all or keep yours separate?

Art has been a main passion in our household since the beginning of our marriage in 2010, and one in which I am supported by my husband. He has a deep knowledge of history and sociology, therefore he also tends to make his own reasoning in a choice of a work.

We look at the works together, we aim not to always buy accomplished artists, or look only for established names. On the contrary, to build our art collection we studied at first the artists who represented modernist art movements. We then moved on to considering the artists who clearly depict the current contemporary moment, or whose works have a meaning in the context of the current social and socio-political issues. Their work has to tell the tale of the present, and have a connection to the future in terms of materials, texture, significance, mediums and practices.

As an art consultant do you tend to follow the same approach and have similar inspirations, or do you explore new art movements that may better suit the taste of the art collector you advise?

When advising my clients, I go beyond the contemporary art works and also cover collectable fine design and European vintage furniture. Indeed, over the years I have realized that most art collectors do appreciate combining contemporary art works with unique pieces of furniture to further enhance their homes.

What I love when advising a client is the discovery process. I typically start with an interview about the client's life, character, plans and hopes to then focus on his or her existing collection to understand how it started, how it developed and how it fits with the client's personality and future plans. For instance, is there a "fil rouge" throughout the collection and does the client wishes to continue in the same direction, or does the collection reflects different stages of the collector's life and taste development? If so, I try to identify a possible new stage and thus ensure that my curatorial choices would reflect the collector's current taste and directions for the collection.

With this in mind, I carry out an initial research, based on my knowledge of the current market, current trends, and then I attempt to look in the future, to then identify a number of options. It is then that the collector can help to make final choice or in identifying new options from which to come to a final choice.