

Press release, Bucharest 11 June 2024

**MNAR-Muzeul Național de Artă al României  
Embassy of Italy in Romania  
Italian Institute of Culture in Bucharest**

*present*

**ILEANA SONNABEND  
&  
ARTE POVERA**

**curated by Ilaria Bernardi**

**26 June - 22 September 2024**

**The exhibition is organized in collaboration with Antonio Homem of the Sonnabend Collection Foundation**

With the exhibition *ILEANA SONNABEND & ARTE POVERA*, the MNAR-Muzeul Național de Artă al României, in collaboration with the Italian Embassy in Romania, the Italian Cultural Institute in Bucharest and Antonio Homem of the Sonnabend Collection Foundation, pays tribute to the life and work of Romanian-born gallery owner Ileana Sonnabend.

Ileana Sonnabend (whose surname at birth was Schapira) was born on 25 October 1914 in Bucharest and died in New York on 21 October 2007. Open to art and culture from an early age, she met Leo Castelli in Bucharest, whom she married in 1933. Two years later, on the eve of the outbreak of World War II, the two left for New York where they founded an art gallery in 1957 that became fundamental for the dissemination of contemporary American art. Having later separated from Leo Castelli, in 1961 Ileana Sonnabend returned to Europe with her second husband, Michael Sonnabend, first to Rome and then to Paris.

These experiences marked the path that would lead her to become a leading exponent of the art of the second half of the 20th century, promoting a dialogue between American and European art through the activity of the art gallery that she opened with Michael Sonnabend in Paris in 1962 and then in New York in 1970.

In the 1960s, in addition to supporting American artists such as Jim Dine, Jasper Johns, Roy Lichtenstein, Claes Oldenburg, Robert Rauschenberg and Andy Warhol, Ileana Sonnabend had strong and continuous relations with Italy, paying specific attention to Arte Povera which, being theorized in 1967 by the critic Germano Celant, is still today the most internationally renowned Italian art movement of the post-World War II period.

In order to emphasize Ileana Sonnabend's far-sightedness and openness towards Italian art, the exhibition at the MNAR focuses on her relationship with the Arte Povera artists who exhibited in her gallery: those were Giovanni Anselmo, Pier Paolo Calzolari, Jannis Kounellis, Mario Merz, Giulio Paolini, Michelangelo Pistoletto and Gilberto Zorio.

The works on display were mostly created between the early 1960s and the early 1970s, and have become icons of art history. They include the mirror paintings *Due uomini in camicie* (*Two Men in Shirts*, 1963) and *Ragazza che cammina* (*Girl Walking*, 1966) by Pistoletto, *Torsione* (*Torsion*, 1968) by Anselmo, *Apoteosi di Omero* (*Apotheosis of Homer*, 1970-1971) by Paolini, and *Sedia* (*Chair*, 1966) by Zorio.

As a preface to the focus on Arte Povera, the exhibition includes a tribute to Mario Schifano, as he was the first Italian artist Ileana Sonnabend exhibited, thus marking the beginning of her deep connection with Italian art.

Preceding the viewing of the works are two chronological, textual and photographic in-depth studies: the first on Ileana Sonnabend and the second on her relationship with the Arte Povera artists.

At the end of the exhibition, a video documentary on the gallery owner and Italian art is screened, made for the occasion by 3D Produzioni and intended for broadcast on Italian television.

The exhibition is the first exhibition that Romania dedicates to the Romanian gallerist and the first international exhibition that pays tribute to her not based on works from her collection, currently belonging to the Sonnabend Collection Foundation. Indeed, in order both to differentiate itself from such previous exhibition projects dedicated to her and to emphasize the still strong link between Ileana Sonnabend's history and Italy, the exhibition at MNAR includes works that are owned by Italian subjects - *i.e.*, by Italian Arte Povera artists or their heirs, or by museums, foundations, private collectors, and Italian gallerists - either exhibited in her gallery or showed elsewhere. Significance of the exhibition is therefore crucial both for Romania and Italy.

The curator of the exhibition is Ilaria Bernardi, a contemporary art historian specializing in post-war Italian art, with a particular focus on Arte Povera artists, a research to which she has also dedicated an important exhibition at the Wits Art Museum, Johannesburg, in October 2023. She has collaborated with, among others, Germano Celant, the theorist of Arte Povera, and Carolyn Christov Bakargiev. She curated exhibitions for public institutions in important exhibition spaces in Italy and abroad, including: in Rome, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Palazzo delle Esposizioni, MAXXI; in Lombardy, Triennale di Milano; Villa and Collezione Panza, Varese; in the United States, Magazzino Italian Art, Cold Spring (NY), ArtOmi (Ghent, NY); South Africa, Keyes Art Mile and Wits Art Museum, Johannesburg; 6 Spin Street, Cape Town.

*“Ileana Sonnabend's gaze has been able to perceive the creative essence of European and American artistic research in the second half of the 20th century, identifying artists and works that have had a profound impact on the history of international art. These certainly include the Italian artists she supported; in particular, those of Arte Povera, whose power of language she immediately understood, and consequently the exportability of their works in the European and American context. The exhibition in Bucharest wishes to pay tribute to that powerful insight of hers, but also to the importance of Arte Povera in the international art context”* (Ilaria Bernardi, exhibition curator).

In addition to all the artists, their archives and the lenders of the works, we would like to thank Antonio Homem, the heir of Ileana and Michael Sonnabend, for his indispensable help in the elaboration of this project and the research needed to implement it.

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## BIOGRAPHY ILEANA SONNABEND

Ileana Schapira's life in art began in 1935, when she moved to Paris with her husband from Trieste, Leo Castelli (Trieste, 4 September 1907 - New York, 21 August 1999), who opened a gallery in the French capital with the financial help of his wife's father, a Romanian industrialist. When war broke out, the couple moved to New York, where Leo Castelli opened his own gallery in 1957, while his wife began to take an interest in and collect the works of the artists followed by her husband, mainly exponents of the American neo-avant-garde.

After divorcing Castelli and remarrying Michael Sonnabend, from whom she took her surname, she moved to Rome in the early 1960s with her new husband, a lover of Dante and Michelangelo and a passionate mentor of young American artists. Together they started to show Italian dealers and critics the documentation of American Pop Art artists that had become part of their collection, but encountered many difficulties.

In 1962 they then decided to open their first gallery in Paris, under the name Ileana Sonnabend, with the intention of bringing American art into dialogue with European art, demonstrating their affinity.

It was, however, with Italy that the relationship began to prove most fruitful, as at the same time it was Italy that became the cradle of two important responses to both Pop Art and Minimal Art in the United States, thanks to the birth, first, of Italian Pop Art and then of Arte Povera.

For this reason, in 1963 the Sonnabend Gallery dedicated a solo exhibition to Mario Schifano and included Michelangelo Pistoletto in the group show *Dessins*, to whom it then dedicated a solo exhibition in 1967, the year also of the solo exhibition of another Italian artist, Piero Gilardi. In the second half of the 1960s, she also formed strong relationships with the Italian art dealer Gian Enzo Sperone and the critic Germano Celant, who found an ally in Sperone's Turin gallery to promote the artists of the Arte Povera movement, which Celant himself theorised in 1967. Ileana Sonnabend's intense relationship with Sperone and Celant led to solo exhibitions of Gilberto Zorio, Mario Merz and Giovanni Anselmo in 1969.

Albeit the Paris branch remained active until 1980, Ileana Sonnabend and her husband opened a second branch in New York in 1970. In 1970, solo exhibitions were held there by Giorgio Griffa, Mario Merz, Pier Paolo Calzolari; in 1971 by Pier Paolo Calzolari and Mario Merz; in 1972 by Piero Manzoni, Giulio Paolini and Jannis Kounellis.

In 1972, Ileana Sonnabend started Sonnabend Press, entrusting direction to Germano Celant. Hence the numerous monographs dedicated to Arte Povera artists, published by Sonnabend Press.

In addition to further solo exhibitions of the Italian artists mentioned above, in 1975 Vincenzo Agnetti and in 1976 Luigi Ontani joined the Sonnabend Gallery. It was however with Kounellis that Ileana Sonnabend would forge the most assiduous relationship, consisting of no less than seven more solo exhibitions until 1987.

At the end of the 1990s, the Sonnabend Gallery moved to Chelsea and remained active for several years after the death of its founder in 2007.

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