Collecting Art: the not-for-profit sector and the art market

Descrizione

Introduction

In 1974, Achille Bonito Oliva described the art system as “a chain of complementary roles, composed by artists, critics, dealers, collectors, museums, media and public. This system actually becomes international in the Sixties, when trades between Western Europe and the United States intensified, allowing the circulation and recognition of artists and poetic groups(1)”.

Since then, the system of contemporary art, “has developed considerably, especially at the international level: its structures have multiplied and became more complex, and its internal processes have been an evolution much more dynamic(2)”, as Francesco Poli states.

After the definition by these eminent opinions of the framework within which my dissertation will take place, I will try to outline in these pages, the profile of the nonprofit sector in the world of art collection, outlining the actors involved, the missions pursued, the course of action and the relationships that develop between all actors involved, leaving some examples of the Foundations of contemporary art world.

Before undertaking this path, however, it is better to make a foreword. The artwork, although like other products depends on the existence of producers and consumers (in other words, artists and art lovers or collectors), it is not a good as the others. For a work of art is the offer to create the demand, on the contrary to what one might assume in the traditional economic markets.

The not-profit sector in the art world

With *non-profit*, an Anglo-Saxon legal expression, are identified those organizations

whose primary purpose is not the achievement of profit, but those entities which reinvest their incomes within the structure, pursuing public purposes and utility.

The non-profit associations, in conjunction with Foundations and committees, represent the legal form provided by the Italian law for the non-profit sector. For these three legal structures are essential the statutory objectives, also called mission, established in the statute by an enacting act.

Consider the example of non-profit organizations in the contemporary art world. They are experimental platforms engaged in organizing projects for the promotion and research of contemporary art, at the national and international level.

The main instruments through which the associations operate are the organization of exhibitions, the conservation of artists' materials, the development of educational activities, seminars, conferences, workshops and residencies for artists.

Some associations also provide a wide offer of networking and counseling services for artists. What is interesting for these research areas is to guarantee the distribution of art and knowledge, to promote networks and partnerships, to offer a wide network of documentation services for artists and the public, to foster the exchange and the comparison of the arts, in order to examine in depth the qualitative research of codes and languages of art and to support the artistic message as a potential innovator in contemporary society.

In Italy, art Foundations play a central role alongside the reality of institutional museum with a business model that over the years has been considerably changed. The evolution has entailed a transfer from simple forms of patronage to a well-defined legal structure able to share private resources with public purpose. In a period of crisis like the present, projects are supported mainly by the good relations that a Foundation has been able to entertain with its stakeholders over the years.

The big challenge now, more than ever, is to find new and durable forms of fundraising in order to support its cultural business in the course of time, in addition to funding the most ambitious projects, without depending on the traditional sponsorship, a volatile generosity connected to a single event.

Why a Foundation: the mission

What reasons are hidden behind the creation of a Foundation? We can identify three main incentives, responsible for the creation of a Foundation. For some institutions it is responding to a desire to promote contemporary art and to create spaces for young artists.

For instance, are moved by these reasons the Fare Association, whose mission aims “to spread the culture as a tool for social integration, territorial regeneration and multicultural comparison, in order to stimulate the educational process and the access to the system of contemporary art of the new generations of artists, as well as the authoring of channels of communication and international exchange.”(3) Or as the Pistoletto Foundation, whose mission is to “inspire and produce a responsible change in society through ideas and creative projects.”(4)

For others, it is the will to share their art collections with the public; as it happened for the Giovanni and Marella Agnelli Gallery, founded in 2002 to accommodate 25 masterpieces from their private collection. Ultimately, there are Foundations born on the initiative of an artist, who in addition to collect a significant core of their works, such as the Pomodoro Foundation and Merz Foundation, are intended to be a development center for the arts.

Why was founded the Pomodoro Foundation? “*The Foundation was created to be a place of study and discussion around the important themes and great figures of the contemporary avant-garde as well as acting as a real cultural center*“.(5)

The actors in the art Foundations: roles and relationships

The art system is composed of a precise and at the same time flexible structure within which different actors move, such as public institutions, galleries, private collectors, traders, auction houses, Foundations, not-profit organizations, critics and curators, cultural workers, business associations, publishers, artists and the audience.

All these figures perform specific activities, complementary to each other, in order to support the production and dissemination of art and culture. Each of the actors mentioned above, helps to draw the subtle but strong web of the art system; a large number of micro-worlds, each one with its own specific structure, interconnected with each other.

Schematically, an administrative organization chart of a Foundation can be summarized as follows: the founders, the president, the board of directors, the secretary and the board of accountants. The founders are those who have participated in the constitutive act and the people who will be subsequently recognized as such by the founders in charge.

To them is reserved any decision of extraordinary administration, the destination and the loan of artworks, the policy of exhibition events, as well as the approval of the budget, the designation of board members and disposal of competence of the Board of Directors, the nomination of the President and the Secretary.

The President must be chosen among the founders and it is his duty to represent the Foundation from the legal point of view. The Director Board is composed of a variable number of components, in charge for a specific period of time. The Director Board shall have all powers of ordinary and extraordinary administration and powers to decide the acceptance of donation or endows by the founders. The Secretary instead, has the task of the financial and administrative accounting of the Foundation and the preparation of the annual plan of activities of the Foundation, taking care of the

implementation after the approval by the Director Board.

The Board of Accounting proof-readers plays the role of control of the management of the budget, accounting and cash control. The operating organizational chart is instead composed of the following figures: the artistic director, the curator, the registrar, the responsible of the communication and marketing, the educational department and the outfitting.

The artistic director cares, coordinates, organizes and directs event projects according to certain content, choices, and artistic-cultural lines, indicating protagonists, features, themes and methods of implementation, aspects of communication. The curator is responsible for all aspects of the organization of an exhibition. This includes responsibility for the content, the preparations and the organization. His main task is to qualify the institutional space within which it operates, primarily by regulating the duty to involve the public. Other responsibilities include the management of staff and the search for financial support in the case of operating within a public institution. His role is not to be confused with that of the director of the institution, whose power also oversees the curatorial choices.

The registrar is responsible for the management of works and installations of art and design in museums and exhibition. In particular he coordinates all phases and the technical and organizational procedures relating to loans and events. He also controls aspects of storage and safety of the works on the basis of in-depth knowledge of their material characteristics and structural. The responsible of the communication and marketing, is responsible for managing Foundation’s internal and external communications. His or her assignment is to supervise public relation staff and create communication strategies. The aim of the educational department is to approach art to the public proposing paths, creative workshops and special projects. The philosophy of the educational department put the visitor at the centre of the learning experience. Finally, the goal of the outfitting is to minimize the presence of technical structures in order to endorse the art work and bring the attention to the content rather than the container.

The exception that proves the rule: Herb and Dorothy

As in any system that is to be respected, there is an exception that proves the rule, even in the field of collecting; an exception that goes beyond as described up to now. This is the story of Herb and Dorothy, a couple of elderly New Yorkers, who with the few financial resources they had were able to establish over the years an important contemporary art collection. They have been described as “proletarian art collectors”.

It is a love story in which the collecting has played a role of profound union. Their passion for art did not stop in the face of economic issues and the result is the creation of one of the most important private collections of contemporary art in the world.

Megumi Sasaki narrated their fascinating history in the documentary “Herb & Dorothy” (2008). Herbert Vogel worked as a civil servant in New York City for more than a halfcentury while gathering what has been called one of the most important post-1960s art collections in the United States, mostly of minimalist and conceptual art. Dorothy Faye Hoffman worked until her retirement in 1990 as a librarian for the Brooklyn Public Library. Herbert and Dorothy married in 1962. They bought a ceramic piece by Pablo Picasso to celebrate their engagement. A piece called *Crushed Car Parts* by American sculptor John Chamberlain was their first post-wedding acquisition. The couple used Dorothy’s incomes to cover their living expenses and instead of eating in restaurants or travelling, they used Herb’s income, which peaked at $23,000 annually, for art. They didn’t buy for investment purposes, choosing only pieces they personally liked and could carry home on the subway or in a taxi. They bought directly from the artists, often paying in installments. Once, according to the Washington Post, they received a collage from environmental artist Christo in exchange for cat-sitting.

In 1975, they held the first exhibition of their collection, at the Clocktower Gallery in lower Manhattan. They amassed a collection of over 4,782 works, which they displayed and also stored in closets and under the bed. Their collection eventually came to include work from artists such as pop artist Roy Lichtenstein, photographers

Cindy Sherman and Lorna Simpson, minimalist Robert Mangold and post-minimalist Richard Tuttle. In 1992, they decided to transfer the entire collection to the National Gallery of Art because it charges no admission, doesn't sell donated works, and they wanted their art to belong to the public. In 2008, Herb and Dorothy Vogel made an announcement that stunned the art world: they launched *The Dorothy and Herbert Vogel Collection: Fifty Works for Fifty States* along with the National Gallery of Art, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Institute of Museum and Library Services.

The program donated 2,500 works to 50 institutions across 50 states and was accompanied by a book with the same name. Though their collection was now worth millions of dollars, the couple did not sell a single piece, instead giving fifty works to one museum in every state. Having worked their whole lives as civil servants, their wish was to give back to the people of the United States.

One year ago, on July 22, 2012, Dorothy declared their collection closed after the passing of her husband Herb. Dorothy works to create a living tribute to their partnership, the collection they created together, and the overwhelmingly positive legacy they have left on the American art world for generations to come.

Notes

(1) A. B. Oliva, *Arte e sistema dell'arte*, Galleria L. De Domizio, 1975.
(2) Francesco Poli, *Il sistema dell'arte contemporanea*, ed. Laterza, Bari, 2004.
(3) www.farearte.org
(4) www.cittadellarte.it
(5) www.fondazionearnaldopomodoro.it

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