



Giuseppe Morra, Casa Morra, Naples, 2016, photo: Amedeo Benestante, courtesy of the Fondazione Morra

Located between the dormant Vesuvius and the abundant Tyrrhenian Sea, overlooking and embracing the dazzling Gulf of Naples, the venues of Fondazione Morra are undoubtedly exceptional. It is indeed one of the most compelling and powerful contemporary art institutions in Naples. By powerful, I mean not only an impressive and valuable collection of the international artistic avant-garde, including the highlights of Duchamp, Cage, Man Ray, Beuys, Nitsch, Shimamoto and Living Theatre, to name but a few. The power of this institution lies also in creating strong and lasting bonds between people, places and ideas, which inspire unforgettable actions and creative experiments, evolving into new artistic and cultural qualities. I met Giuseppe (Peppe) Morra — the generous founder, passionate collector, tender visionary and dear friend of artists — accompanied by the President of the Morra Foundation, Teresa Carnevale, to talk about the history, objectives and distinctive features of their institution.

FONDAZIONE MORRA

COLLECTING AS A PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE

*A Conversation with Giuseppe Morra – the Founder and Collector,
and the President of the Morra Foundation, Teresa Carnevale*



Installation view: Allan Kaprow. 1st year: L'avanguardia americana, Casa Morra, Naples, 2016, photo: Amedeo Benestante, courtesy of the Fondazione Morra



Installation view: Vettor Pisani. 3rd year: 3P+B, Casa Morra, Naples, 2018, photo: Amedeo Benestante, courtesy of the Fondazione Morra

Marta Wróblewska: I'd like to begin with a somewhat banal yet fundamental question: why and when did you decide to become an art collector?

Giuseppe Morra: The nature of collecting arises from the desire to possess a work of art. However, it doesn't stop there — possession of an artwork awakens the desire to understand why it was born and who created it. Nowadays collecting is mainly treated as an economic investment. I see it as a form of experiencing life by establishing a special emotional and intellectual relationship with the artwork and the artist. For me, it all started at the end of the 1960s with artists like Stelio Maria Martini, Luciano Caruso, Luca Castellano, Luigi Mainolfi, Giuseppe Maraniello and Errico Ruotolo. In those days, we were all young and eager to influence the surrounding reality, we felt extraordinary will and power to take actions that would impact the future. Over time, my collecting evolved into a kind of life philosophy. I believe that my work serves a much broader purpose than just accumulating capital. It lies in cultivating knowledge and contributing to the development of the history of aesthetics. That's why I'm interested not just in the market value of artworks, but most of all in their significance with reference to the future.

MW: The Morra collection has a very particular profile reflecting a fascination with the avant-garde, theatre, body art and performance. What influenced those choices?

GM: It is again a philosophical choice. I try to pursue a thought, create a concept which leads me to acquire more profound knowledge about humanity and existence. A good work of art enters one's life in a deeper sense, inciting diverse processes that influence character and experience, generating a strong desire to search and research.

MW: The collection has grown over almost 50 years into an enormous size. From the perspective of time, can you see distinct phases in its development?

GM: I came from the private sector, but now the meaning of the collection as an acquired set of physical artworks representing given financial value is secondary to me. My goal is to endow it with a broader social, pedagogical and cultural purpose. That is why we have been developing the ideas of archiving, participation and education around it. This is indeed a huge jump from the commercial to the social mission I am now pursuing. Certainly, I am receiving extraordinary support from the president of my foundation, Teresa



Installation view: John Cage, Marcel Duchamp. 1st year: L'avanguardia americana, Casa Morra, Naples, 2016, photo: Amedeo Benestante, courtesy of the Fondazione Morra

Carnevale, and the team of predominantly young people who join us. We also work with professionals and researchers who disseminate our concept, taking it to a higher intellectual level and building a certain phenomenology around it for the sake of its future.

Teresa Carnevale: Today the Morra collection encompasses more than 10,000 works of art and around 100,000 documents collected, donated or acquired. The decision to transform the commercial Studio Morra into the Morra Foundation in the 1990s resulted from a more profound need to leave a trace in history. You may say it was a form of personal narcissism; however, one that simultaneously had a broad social consequence.

MW: Would you agree that collecting is often regarded as a sort of addiction, while the collector is reminiscent of a mad visionary?

GM: Certainly collecting is a sort of addiction which cannot be stopped. It is a hunger to possess more and more both to multiply wealth, but also to cultivate the love of art. Associating vision with madness seems to be a way to explain a deviation from the commonly acknowledged norm. In fact, to be able to cross the limits imposed by the world, artists need to display a little bit of madness. Hence, it can be interpreted as a sort of philosophy that leads to an expansion of the intellectual universe.

MW: The history of the Morra collection is also a riveting chronicle of artistic encounters. Have you ever considered writing an autobiography?

GM: Certainly, an autobiography in the sense of a *catalogue raisonné* of the collection is among the things to do. But it is not directly my task. At this point, I'm trying to give shape to the processes from which my collection resulted, by providing it with proper space and systematising works around it. Indeed, my artist-friends are a crucial part of my biography. But equally important is the lesson I owe to the Futurists, whose experimental artistic practice transgressed traditional patterns and left a huge impact on generations to come.

TC: Peppe always says: the more you give, the more you receive. His generosity towards artists and diverse art beneficiaries has resulted in an exceptional exchange, not only in a material but most of all in a human sense. In my opinion, he would make a great politician, due to his remarkable ability to bring people together. His ideology, however, has grown out of his independence, and his vision has never been temporal. Moreover, he managed to retain a particular kind of curiosity, which is almost that of a child — the ability to look at things always from a new, fresh perspective.

MW: You have also developed a curatorial practice around your collection. What characterises it?

GM: The curatorial project I conceived called 'Archivi d'Arte Contemporanea. Il Gioco dell'Oca — 100 anni di mostre' provides potential to think about the future of my collection. It's strongly connected with bringing together everything we've achieved so far and developing it further in a sustainable way. It resulted from a choice of a particular exhibition place and a master plan associated with the goal to promote social engagement and disseminate knowledge. I should also mention the project called 'Quartiere dell'arte' dedicated to the Avvocata neighbourhood in which Casa Morra is situated. In this case, we are aiming at connecting institutions, bigger and smaller businesses and the people behind them, to create a special kind of cultural bond and retain the unique atmosphere of the area.

MW: Your activities have always been connected with very special venues: Studio Morra was located in Via Calabritto at the centre of the prestigious Chiaia district close to the gallery of Lucio Amelio, next came Palazzo dello Spagnolo ai Vergini in Sanità, and now Palazzo Ayerbo D'Aragona Cassano in Avvocata. What is the relationship between the activities of Fondazione Morra, the architecture and the city of Naples?

GM: Don't forget the Hermann Nitsch Museum located in a former power plant representing the industrial heritage of Naples, and Vigna San Martino which, in my opinion, constitutes the quintessence of the Neapolitan dream and beauty. All those places were not accidental. The most beautiful architecture of the Neapolitan palaces and the exceptional *genius loci* of the city itself gave me a lot of power to maintain the continuity of my mission. I strongly believe that the extraordinary surrounding provides perfect ground to grow high-minded ideas.

TC: Peppe has always exhibited a strong sense of belonging to the city of Naples, which he has never abandoned despite numerous possibilities. He's always shared this bond with people who arrive in Naples looking for inspiration or willing to make their creative contribution. This rootedness also entails intrinsic knowledge about the place and belief that it can offer an incomparable, unforgettable experience. In fact, it has drawn to Naples top artists like Allan Kaprow, Hermann Nitsch, Al Hansen and Cai Guo-Qiang. They didn't come with ready-made projects, but always tried to permeate the tissue of the city and bring in their own artistic quality.

MW: What is the future of Fondazione Morra?

TC: Peppe is a person who never gives up, but also never finishes things, which can be seen both as a virtue and a vice. In this sense, all projects he initiates are open-ended. This also shapes our working methods and the nature of our activities. What distinguishes us is the ability to adapt and remain flexible. Certainly, we aspire



Installation view: Luca Maria Patella. 3rd year: 3P+B, Casa Morra, Naples, 2018, photo: Amedeo Benestante, courtesy of the Fondazione Morra

to receive recognition as public heritage and asset, especially because we are so immersed in the city of Naples. This, however, might come with the loss of autonomy underlying the dynamics of our present existence as an entirely private institution. But sometimes, to gain something one needs to sacrifice something else.

MW: Are there any Polish artists in the Morra collection?

GM: I have never thought about art in territorial or national categories. Certainly, there are artists who define themselves through the place they come from. However, I have always been inspired by personalities and potentials — for example, Arturo Schwarz, who had the special ability to integrate artists and art regardless of any borders. This is also what we are trying to do as a Foundation.

TC: It is true that Peppe looks beyond territorial and national borders; however, in the end he always returns home. Because Casa Morra is not just another art institution, but a place permeated with a feeling of familiarity and friendship. I believe this is why we have been so fortunate to build strong and long-lasting artistic and interpersonal relations, which are the source of our strength and motivation. ●