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New Guide in Venice

Samuele Pellecchia for The New York Times

Massimiliano Gioni, 39, the 2013 Venice Biennale curator is also the associate director and director of exhibitions for the New Museum. More Photos »

By CAROL VOGEL
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Massimiliano Gioni, the artistic director of this year's Venice Biennale, was marveling at the rich history of this 118-year-old international contemporary art exhibition.

"Klimt showed there in 1905," he said. "That is mind-blowing to me. Since then there has been Morandi and Picasso, Rauschenberg, Johns and so on. Maybe I'm romanticizing, but the past is still very present."

On a rainy afternoon in April Mr. Gioni was having lunch at his regular haunt, a tiny Italian restaurant in Lower Manhattan near the New Museum, where he is associate director and director of exhibitions. His BlackBerry was buzzing with e-mails and his phone kept ringing. Yet Mr. Gioni, 39, ignored it all, speaking earnestly with his usual intellectual intensity jolted with unexpected moments of deadpan humor. He was explaining what it's like to be the youngest artistic director in 110 years to organize the first, oldest and most venerable international art event in a calendar packed with an unrivaled number of them.

"Of course I'm nervous," he said. "This is center stage and it's difficult because it comes with so many expectations and so much history."

As he braces for the art world to descend on Venice for three preview days beginning on Wednesday, followed by the public opening on Saturday, Mr. Gioni estimated that nearly 500,000 people would come to see the Biennale by the time it ends on Nov. 24. As artistic director, his job is not only to be the diplomatic face of the Biennale but also to organize an enormous exhibition in two sites: one in a central building in the shaded gardens at the tip of Venice where the national pavilions are, and the other in the nearby Arsenale, the meandering medieval network of shipyards. The job entails an overwhelming amount of juggling and his ambitious vision has only made it worse.

Even though Mr. Gioni was born in Italy — in Busto Arsizio, 40 minutes northwest of Milan — the logistics of working in a city like Venice are a notorious nightmare. Adamant that this will not be a boiler plate survey of contemporary art, Mr. Gioni has enlisted 158 artists, nearly double the number of the two previous Biennales.

"It will zigzag across histories, covering 100 years of dreams and visions," said Mr. Gioni, noting 38 countries are represented. "A biennale can be pedagogical without being boring."

"The Encyclopedic Palace" is the theme. It is taken from the title of a symbol of 1950s-era Futurism — an 11-foot-tall architectural model of a 136-story cylindrical skyscraper that was intended to house all the knowledge in the world. Its creator, the self-taught Italian-American artist Marino Auriti, dreamed it would be built on the National Mall in Washington. The model now belongs to the

American Folk Art Museum in Manhattan, which is lending it to the Biennale. “It best reflects the giant scope of this international exhibition,” Mr. Gioni said, “the impossibility of capturing the sheer enormity of the art world today.”

Paolo Baratta, the longtime president of the Biennale, said that “after 14 years of having traditional curators I thought it was time to ask a man of the next generation.”

“At a time when contemporary art is flooding the world,” he added, “it seemed to make more sense to present a show that doesn’t just include a list of artists from the present but rather looks at today’s art through the eyes of history.”

Philippe Ségalot, a private art dealer, called Mr. Gioni “a rising star.”

“Even though he’s so young,” Mr. Ségalot said, “he’s already a brand and one of the most sought after curators around. As a result expectations are unusually high. Everyone wants to see what he’ll deliver.”

Mr. Gioni is mixing high and low, with masters mingling with self-taught and outsider artists. Besides Mr. Auriti, there will be work by names likely to be unfamiliar to even art world insiders. There are arcane objects like a deck of tarot cards created by the British occultist and artist Aleister Crowley, abstract paintings by the Swedish artist and mystic Hilma af Klint and shaker drawings on loan from the Hancock Shaker Village in Pittsfield, Mass. For one show within a show, the photographer Cindy Sherman is organizing an exhibition at the Arsenale. Known for photographing herself transformed into hundreds of different personas, including movie stars, Valley girls and menacing clowns, she appealed to Mr. Gioni because, he said, “image plays a big role at this year’s Biennale, and Cindy has spent her life representing herself as others.” Ms. Sherman is creating a kind of bizarre doll’s house with works by little-known artists, prison inmates and popular figures like Robert Gober, Charles Ray, Paul McCarthy and Rosemarie Trockel.

An old ship is coming by boat from Iceland; a 200-year-old church is en route from Vietnam; and dozens of contemporary artists need hand-holding while they grapple with installing videos or preparing for complex performances. “Right now I wish there was another me,” Mr. Gioni said with a sigh.

Besides organizing the event he has also been a fund-raiser. Money is always tight at any Biennale, and his budget of about $2.3 million simply wasn't enough to cover his expenses. He has raised more than $2 million on top of that, he said, "mostly from private individuals and foundations and philanthropists."

Although Mr. Gioni is considered something of a star within the close-knit world of contemporary art, he had a larger presence early in his career as the doppelgänger of the mischievous Italian artist Maurizio Cattelan. Mr. Cattelan, who is more than a decade older, routinely sent him in his place to do radio and television interviews and even lectures. The prank worked for a while, Mr. Gioni recalled, until a series of mishaps. He was speaking at a lecture organized by the Public Art Fund when Tom Eccles, its director, showed slides of Mr. Cattelan's self-portraits. "It was obvious I wasn't him," Mr. Gioni recalled.

Then there was the time he posed as Mr. Cattelan on television and the station's switchboard became jammed with viewers complaining that an impostor was on the air.

"Maurizio was so in demand and I liked it because I thought it was a way to be a committed critic, giving your words to an artist," Mr. Gioni said.

Less than a month before the Biennale was set to open, Mr. Gioni could be found sitting around the dining room table of his apartment, a spare sun-filled East Village walk-up that he shares with his wife of three years, Cecilia Alemani, director of art at the High Line. With him were three assistants, each glued to laptops. Wearing jeans, a white shirt and red sneakers, Mr. Gioni had a way of juggling complex issues with a cool head, quoting wise words from a philosopher one moment and making a wry joke the next. The group was reviewing each artist in the exhibition, name by name, and checking the status of their work.

What about Roger Hiorns? Mr. Gioni asked.

"He's concerned his installation will be too near a door," replied Helga Christoffersen, an assistant.

Mr. Gioni explained, "It's a pulverized altar from a church from England."

"That's going to be a big hit with the Catholic folks," he said deadpan, receiving a big laugh from the group. (For the first time the Vatican is represented in its own pavilion at the Biennale.)

Camille Henrot? “Missing in action,” Mr. Gioni said slightly nervously.

The group then looked at images online of the “S. S. Hangover,” the Icelandic artist Ragnar Kjartansson’s fishing boat that will have six horn players performing on the water in the Arsenale for four hours every day for six months. “We’re working with a conservatory in Venice to find the players,” Mr. Gioni said.

When trying to visualize the installation of the circular entrance in the main pavilion where he plans to display 40 pages of Carl Jung’s “Red Book,” an illuminated manuscript on which he worked for more than 16 years, Mr. Gioni grabbed a ruler, went into the living room and measured out the space on the floor with masking tape, trying to figure out the correct height for the climate-controlled vitrine.

“He’s obsessed,” Mr. Cattelan said. “When he gets in bed at night he’s not just thinking about the big picture but also about the number of electrical outlets or the height of a video. He gets caught up in the details most curators normally don’t take care of. Being super bright helps; so does his superior knowledge of art.”

Mr. Gioni’s methods may be a bit unconventional, but then he didn’t come to the job in the same way as many of his predecessors. He never got a Ph.D. in art history; nor did he spend years climbing his way up the curatorial ladder. But at 39 he has had more hands-on experience overseeing biennales than anyone of his generation: In 2003 he was the curator of the section called “La Zona” at the Venice Biennale. In 2004 he was co-curator of the fifth edition of the traveling biennial Manifesta, a roving European event that was held that year in San Sebastián, Spain; in 2006 he organized the fourth Berlin Biennale in collaboration with Mr. Cattelan and Ali Subotnick, a curator at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles. And in 2010 he was the youngest and first European director of the Gwangju Biennale in South Korea, its eighth, which attracted more than 500,000 visitors and got rave reviews.

Besides his role at the New Museum, where he has spearheaded many ground breaking shows including “The Generational: Younger Than Jesus,” its first triennial, he is also artistic director of the Nicola Trussardi Foundation in Milan. Lisa Phillips, director of the New Museum, said Mr. Gioni “sees curating as an art form.”

"He is terribly well read without being academic so that he can cut across centuries and create a new story," Ms. Phillips said.

Although it all sounds like pretty serious stuff, but Mr. Gioni has a lighter side too. In 2002 Mr. Gioni, along with Mr. Cattelan and Ms. Subotnick, started "The Wrong Gallery," a minuscule space that was little more than a doorway with a classic Chelsea aluminum-glass front door on West 20th Street. (In 2005 the spoof gallery was evicted, then decamped to the Tate Modern in London in 2005, closing three years later.)

Mr. Gioni's parents are retired — his mother was a schoolteacher and his father was the manager of an ink factory. When he was 15 he moved on his own to Vancouver Island in Canada, where he attended the United World Colleges; later he received a degree in art history from the University of Bologna. The youngest of three siblings, he describes himself as the black sheep of the family.

To support himself through school he worked as a translator and eventually became editor of the Italian edition of Flash Art, where he met Mr. Cattelan; in 1999 he moved to New York as its American editor. He met Francesco Bonami, now an independent curator, and did some work with him. Mr. Bonami was the artistic director of the Venice Biennale in 2003 and it was he who asked Mr. Gioni to organize "La Zona" there. Ms. Phillips hired him at the New Museum in 2006 after seeing the Berlin Biennale, which she called "a standout."

Despite the instantaneous nature of culture today and the proliferation of art fairs and giant exhibitions, Mr. Gioni still believes there is a place for biennales. "I grew up with them," he said. "I saw my first one in Venice in 1993. They are no longer a fixed formula. This is the first decade of a new century and this show will deal with our age of hyperconnectivity, by looking at what goes on in our heads rather than online. It is about the synchronicity of the past, the present and the future."

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: June 2, 2013

An article and an accompanying picture caption last Sunday about Massimiliano Gioni, curator of the 2013 Venice Biennale, misstated his age. He is 39, not 40. The article also described incorrectly the profession of Ali Subotnik, who worked on a project with Mr. Gioni. She is a curator at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, not an independent curator.

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