

art

## Amalia Piccinini – Interview

Jonathan Goodman

The Italian artist and art critic based in New York presents the details of her popular column *New York New York* on contemporary art for *Flash Art*.

When I first met Amalia, it was on the occasion of her last solo exhibition in Manhattan. I remember I was very much impressed by her paintings; beauty and depth were competing to get my all attention in front of the canvas. It was clear that Amalia Piccinini is highly talented painter. After I talked to her, I discovered that she is a multiply talented artist: she is not only a painter, but also a writer, a special one.

I was not surprised, while having a long conversation with her, that in addition of her considerable knowledge on art, she is interested in literature as well as art criticism and poetry. Even when living in Europe, she took it upon herself to read many American writers. Now, although Amalia is an Italian, she is also very much involved with the New York art scene and, more generally, American culture. She moved to New York in 2005 to pursue a career as an artist, and since 2007 she has been the author of the well-known column “New York New York,” a view of American contemporary art for the prestigious Italian magazine *Flash Art*. As an art critic myself, I am an admirer of Amalia Piccinini both as painter and art critic. Reading her column means to have direct access into the studio of the most famous artists living in New York today; it’s not just a studio visit, it’s a new vision of art criticism. And it’s her very own vision, a unique voice in the field.

### —How did you start the column?

—I moved to New York in 2005; two years later, in 2007, Giancarlo Politi, Director of *Flash Art*, gave me the opportunity to begin the column. I have to thank him for the fact that he saw potential in me, trusting in my professionalism, my passion for art in all its expressions, my passion for writing, and my passion for the city of New York. He had an intuition to establish a column consisting of my meetings with artists. This meant that there was a voice that was different from other voices of art criticism. He had understood (before me) that I could write not only about the work but also about the artist—what was behind the artist’s difficulties, occurring in real life at all levels. My column explores the life and art of emerging artists, as well as the life and art of famous artists.

I have to thank Politi for the great freedom and confidence he showed me during the nearly five years I have been writing for *Flash Art*. He always welcomed and encouraged my proposals. When I choose artists or exhibitions to talk about in the column, Politi is always interested to read and publish my experiences in New York. To put it metaphorically, he has given me the freedom to sculpt the style of the column, to give it that cutting edge in appreciation of new art. His freedom allows me to work with great excitement.

### —Today your voice is appreciated and is as well known in the art world in New York as it is in Italy. The emerging artists are looking for you, and celebrities are happy to welcome you in their studios. You've become a reference point for artists and readers. How did you build your reputation in so short a time?

—I imagine that, at some point, as the list of meetings grew, there was talk among the artists about the strength of my writing. Some big names I wrote up have recommended me to their colleagues for the purpose of doing an interview. Indeed, they provided me with contacts for their colleagues. They told me to call them on their behalf, or they would say, "Hey, you should meet him too!" So, for some artists I did not even gain access through the gallery, but instead in a direct way. I was accepted because of my professionalism, my quality of writing, and a tone different from the other writers. My point of view moved into the privacy of the studio, where I had the ability to discern everything. New York is super competitive and expensive, but full of artists who are serious, who keep the studio closed every day to work toward

gaining a spot in a group show or toward preparing the next show for Gagosian.

**—So far, you met many famous artists and investigated not only their work but also the details of their lives in the studio or in their home. Do you have any special memory? Something or some artist that really left a mark on you?**

—I have many memories. Usually when I go visit the artists, I feel good and am very curious to see the work and understand the human aspect of the person, which I cannot grasp in the gallery. However, when in 2008 I went to the home of Louise Bourgeois, I was a little nervous. I had this big canvas in my hand that I would have to show during the Sunday Salon in front of her guests, whose names I did not even know. When I was in front of her house, I found that I could not ring the bell, I thought ... I am going to meet Louise Bourgeois. Then I did it, and when I saw her, I was struck by her intense gaze, very serious, very intense, in a certain sense even melodramatic. She didn't smile, or give a greeting, but she followed me from the corner of the eye. I felt she was studying me. When Robert Storr, who led the salon, told me to show my painting to Bourgeois, she waved. She asked me why I was sad and wanted to know my name. I think she saw sadness in the black and dark green colors of my painting. I was struck by her reaction, I still wonder what my painting triggered in her.

Another anecdote that comes to mind occurred in 2008, when I also went to the studio of Terence Koh. Our conversation took place in a room painted entirely white, talking while the voice of Maria Callas on a recording nearly drowned out our conversation. He never thought to lower the sound, and since we both have a low voice, I could not hear well him, and he did not hear me much at all. I had to make a real effort to reach him. I was most impressed by his presence; he seemed very gentle in manner, in the way he moved, in his voice. For some reason I expected a more eccentric or excessive Koh, but it is an error to think so. Too often one has expectations, or is influenced by the stories that travel through the art world. I have many other stories; would your readers want to know more?

**—Yes, I am sure the readers want to know more.**

—I went to the studio of Damian Loeb, remember that when he opened the door looked at me and said, "Come on in." But then, he went to sit on a red chair and said nothing; he looked at me without asking me to sit. At that point, I broke the ice by saying something about the column. In turn, he relaxed, and our conversation lasted more than two hours. Afterward, he wrote an email to thank me for visiting him, and said that he was immensely pleased to talk to me. He really used that word: *immensely*. Not only that, he said I could visit him at any time, which I did. I went to his studio twice more, with months separating each visit. We are still in contact. I think he's a sophisticated artist and a shy and charming man. Another anecdote that I remember with affection was the studio visit with Agathe Snow. I went to her house; the works were hung here and there and in the kitchen. Wanting to smoke a cigarette, she asked me if I wanted to see the roof. I said, "Sure." On the roof there was a wooden bench, and so we sat down and made the studio visit there. It was a beautiful evening, not cold at all. Her cigarette was gone, but she continued to talk, and the skyscrapers of Wall Street started to light up. Evening fell. For me it was surreal, and poetic. The most interesting aspect of New York is that everyone does what he feels; a roof or a room makes no difference. Should I go on?

**—Sure. Please, one more memory.**

—I went to the studio of Cecily Brown in 2009. It was huge, a studio of one's dreams. She had a very nice red sofa, with small wheels. She pulled the sofa in front of her paintings; sometimes we sat down, and she told me something about the painting. Then we got up and went to another work of art. Inevitably, I got the idea from her to buy the same couch. It was very nice to sit in front of her paintings by simply moving the sofa from one place to the next.

**—In your column you give voice not only to art celebrities but also to internationally emerging artists. And you actually have good eyes to discover them. Did you enjoy your time with emerging artists?**

—Yes, all emerging artists have given me great satisfaction. I met them once they came to New York, in most cases for the first time thanks to residencies. They realized many successes just from a few months after my meeting with them. All of them have been awarded other prestigious residencies, opportunities, and exhibitions; reviews have been written about them; they have published books; and they have been invited to

major projects, exhibitions, biennials. Every time I receive their invitation, I am proud and honored to have discovered them in New York. When they came to America, I was often the first to write about their work, but above all I gave them the opportunity to speak about their experience in America through my column. I am not surprised that all of them have achieved important things, I remember they had determination and discipline, and worked with considerable concentration in their studios. They were very serious about their work.

These are qualities that make me want to write about an artist. In some cases, if the work had not yet matured, I went to see them in the following months, always with great pleasure and curiosity. I would also add that most of the artists who have since left New York have gallery and personal contacts here. Many in fact return at least once a year, and the thing that moves me is that all of them contact me again. These artists call me for a drink or for lunch, or to invite me to their shows. Such an attitude shows that the human aspect is an important part of success.

**—I know your readers often interact with you. What do they actually want to know about the New York art world?**

—They are very curious. They always want to know which are the best current shows in New York. They ask me which shows of the month should they absolutely see, either in galleries and museum. They even asked about after parties and other social events. They have hunger for both the art and the city. Also, young artists, just graduated, asked me for my advice on how to approach the galleries, how to start their career, how to make the first steps.

An interesting thing happened also in 2008. I realized that I became an example for many artists, especially from Italy, who, after reading about my experience attending Louise Bourgeois's Sunday Salon, wanted to meet the artist herself. They started asking me how they could get the appointment, what was the schedule, etc. Unfortunately, only a couple of my artist colleagues were able to get invited to the Sunday Salon. A few months later, Louise Bourgeois holding the salon; this was back in late 2008. Two years later, she passed away. So, I was very lucky to have such a great honor in my life. But readers and other friends who wanted to follow my example were too late.

**—I know, all the art world was saddened by the loss of Louise Bourgeois. I am curious about your audience. What kind of readers do you have?**

—I would say readers from the New York art world and from Italy. A lot of my readers are young, many of them young artists. They are all very ambitious. Then there are the young students who are asking advice or the titles of books for their thesis on art. Also, art lovers and collectors ask my opinion about some specific artist. I additionally receive queries from gallerists, people from other fields like writers, musicians, poets, and travelers. Critics, curators, too.

**—Who are the artists who most influenced you or your work.**

—More than any visual artist, I would say Proust, Kafka, Dostoevskij. The worlds they created are like permanent fires inside my brain. My admiration for the work they left their readers is boundless. I mean, if we just think that Kafka has been able to make us love a roach...make it a most noble creature, we realize something extraordinary has happened.

**—And what about your favorite piece of art?**

—Every dark painting by Bacon, all the drawings by Van Gogh, any portrait by Rembrandt. For me these works reached the highest point of vision, intensity, quality, and tension in art.

**—To me, your column has been a constant source of information and feeling. You even made it possible for me to experience the smell of the studios that you visited. Do you think that the fact of your being a painter has helped you in your writing?**

—Yes, being a painter helps me to get closer to the work of other artists. Like them I too have a studio, I receive studio visits, and I also have similar problems within the art system; therefore, I am sensitive to all these aspects of New York City's art world, and as a painter, I know what's behind a piece of art—usually a lot of work.

I'm not sure other critics see what I see during a studio visit. The point of view is different; the contact is more intimate. It happens that two critics who have a meeting can speak the same language, and two artists who have a meeting can breathe the same air. As for the smell of the studio you mention, I know it well, so I can make the reader feel it in the story.

All the artists I met felt that I understood what they said to me. They didn't have to struggle or play a part to convince me of their achievement. I listen, observe, absorb, and study the work, internalize my experience and begin to write only when I've worked through in my mind everything that has happened during the studio visit. When I greet the artists, after thanking him for inviting me, I tell them that I will begin writing the text only after I have digested my encounter with them. They smile, but they know that I'm serious.

**—What are the shows in New York that you were most excited to see in the last five years?**

—I am very grateful to Larry Gagosian, who has constantly presented the public with the unique opportunity to see works of art that are very difficult to have access to otherwise. Often he shows art taken from private collections; and recently, he has done shows of museum quality. I strongly recommended to all my readers, friends, and colleagues go to see the show “Picasso and Marie-Thérèse: L'amour fou” (Gagosian gallery, 2011). Also I remember that I sent many people to see the work *Infinity Room* by Yayoi Kusama (Gagosian Gallery 2009); her installation consisted of a little room you could go inside in...it was astonishing. I wish everyone saw it. I also recommended the last performance by Terence Koh (Mary Boone, 2011), the retrospective of Louise Bourgeois at the Guggenheim, the retrospective of Bacon, the Van Gogh drawings, the Diane Arbus retrospective, all of them at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Most recently the Alexander McQueen show was very exciting. I am sure I am forgetting others great shows, such as Giacometti's paintings and the work of Piero Manzoni, both again at Gagosian.

I always recommend to readers who are coming to New York from Italy never miss to see the Frick Collection. Recently, I saw a number of incredible paintings by Matisse from the collection of the Cone Sisters of Baltimore at the Jewish Museum, then Edward Hopper at the Whitney few years ago, Paul Thek last year, and more....

**—It sounds like most of the shows you liked were at museums.**

—Honestly, I am not often impressed by works in the gallery. Of course there were a few, but stunning gallery shows do not happen so often, we should be honest.... I was just two weeks ago at the Museum of Modern Art to see the Willem de Kooning retrospective, which I also recommend, when I heard a lady behind me talking with her male friend. I heard him ask: What do you think? She responded: Well, at least they are understandable works of art. Now, I think this lady could represent those New York art viewers who go to Chelsea galleries every month and lose interest because there is so much obscurity. Then they have to run to some museum to see art that stimulates emotion.

Isn't that the truth? Anyway, I am always going to galleries; I have never stopped. I want to be surprised by my generation.

**—What was the nicest compliment that you received for the column?**

—I was called a Hemingway of art criticism, for the fact that I write in a simple and lively style. I am popular because the reader understands what I write; even those who do not understand contemporary art can approach it through my stories. This brings me closer to people. I do not know if it happens to all the critics. I consider it a great compliment.

**—You could say that you have created a new form of art criticism?**

—Yes, I would call my writing, perhaps, fictional criticism. Not because there is invention: what I write is always all true. But because there is an atmosphere, and in my articles there are parts of life, parts of New York, fragments of an afternoon, and there is contemporary art as the protagonist.

**Amalia Piccinini** is an artist and art critic who lives and works in New York. She is the correspondent from New York

for *Flash Art*, and curates its online column New York New York on contemporary art.