

Sistema Arte Roma. A Conversation with Olivia Rainaldi - SEGNONLINE

The art system is a structure that thrives as much on its visible peaks—artists, gallerists, curators—as it does on professionals who often remain in the shadows. Through her ongoing project *Sistema Arte Roma*, 23-year-old Roman photographer **Olivia Rainaldi** is creating a comprehensive map of this multifaceted community. We interviewed her for *segnonline*.

How did the idea of mapping a specific art system come about? What sense of urgency drove you to explore this jungle?

The idea for *Sistema Arte Roma* came from a desire to explore, document, and understand this world in all its different branches. My father is an artist and my mother is an art historian; I have always *lived* art through them. This certainly influenced the conception of the project. In a sense, my desire to observe the art world stems from there. My intention was therefore to gain a clearer view, to discover and rediscover, through photography and through my own gaze, a world I had had the opportunity to glimpse—a world that turned out to be something complex, a vast network in which everything is connected.

Your choice of the capital as your field of investigation—all the people involved work in Rome—is it primarily due to proximity and the resulting logistical ease, or does it have to do with the specific dynamics of a city where historical stratification constantly coexists with the contemporary?

Rome is my city. I was born here, and I still live and work here. I wanted to start from the foundations, from what I know best. I consider myself lucky: Rome is a city unlike any other in the world. It is like a gigantic palimpsest, a dense layering of history and culture coexisting within it. This is why I will also include in the project institutions and people devoted to art from past historical periods—art that still speaks to us and is therefore always contemporary. For these reasons, starting with the capital seemed more than natural to me.

Alongside traditional figures such as artists, gallerists, and curators, the project also features framers, master foundry workers, and even a museum doorman. According to what criteria do you draw the boundaries of this ever-expanding “republic of art”?

My desire is to photograph and show all the pieces of this great mosaic. I photograph people who devote their lives to art, who keep this system alive: carpenters who make custom frames, foundry workers who cast artists’ models. Although they operate behind the scenes, they too help keep the system standing. As I delve deeper, new professions and individuals emerge who turn out to be essential. For example, alongside the traditional figures, I wanted to include people such as the doorman at the former Pastificio Cerere. Through his work, he too is fully part of the art system and contributes to its functioning. I realize that, step by step, the path defines itself, and so do its boundaries.

Your subjects are rigorously photographed within a professional context, which often appears as a carefully calculated extension of their identity. I’m thinking, for example, of the portrait of a gallerist sitting on a sofa whose pose echoes the female figure in a painting behind her. What aspects of the relationship between the individual and their everyday environment interest you most?

It is precisely this identity manifesting itself within a personal space that attracts me: the way a space takes shape according to the person who inhabits it and the work carried out there. I find it fascinating to observe how even people who practice the same profession can turn out to be

profoundly different, and the first way I notice this is by looking at their surroundings. For example, whenever I enter an artist's studio, I notice how differently each of them organize their space. Some are tidy, while others find order in their own disorder. Often, it seems to me that this is reflected in the way they work.

From a practical standpoint, how do the sittings take place? Is there a preliminary phase of conversation, or do you prefer to photograph your subjects on several occasions in order to preserve their spontaneity?

At every meeting, I enter places I don't know. I don't scout locations beforehand; I don't know what the light will be like or how it will behave in that particular place on that particular day. I take the photographs during a single encounter. I go there without preconceptions, without knowing what awaits me. After a few minutes of conversation, if the circumstances and the person's profession allow it, I ask the same question: "Were you working on something before I arrived? If so, please carry on, and I'll take a few photographs in the meantime."

In fact, when I'm photographing an artist or craftsman, I like to photograph them while they are absorbed in their work. Even when it is a "posed" portrait, I don't direct the subjects or ask them to pose. At first, this can cause some embarrassment—especially for those who don't like being photographed—but then they spontaneously assume the position in which they feel most comfortable and naturally reveal their identity to me. In this way, they are the ones who give me the photograph.

Since this is an ongoing project, how many people have been involved so far?

So far, I have photographed around forty people, including artists, photographers, gallerists, patrons, curators, critics and art historians, craftspeople, collectors, foundation presidents, publishers, journalists, and museum directors.

How many more protagonists do you expect to include before you consider the mapping complete?

I think there is still a long way to go. There are still so many people and professions I want to photograph, and I believe the project itself will tell me when it is finished. I don't want to impose a limit on it.

At a time when, even in the art world, personal qualities are giving way to collaborative skills, wouldn't it be worth photographing—though I wouldn't know how; you're the artist, after all—an artificial intelligence?

I have photographed artists who use artificial intelligence as a tool or who explore its themes in their work. I wouldn't go any further than that. I wouldn't photograph AI as a subject because I don't consider it one.

Quite right! Beyond its documentary value, what is the greatest strength of your project?

For me, its greatest strength is certainly its unpredictability and the dynamism that derives from it. Every encounter is profoundly different, and every person I photograph teaches me something new. For those who will see my photographs, I hope to convey a vision of this cultural system in its entirety through the individuality of each subject.

And its greatest weakness?

Its unpredictability.

What else are you working on, and what will you be working on in the future?

At the moment, I am working on the publication of the project, on my Instagram page, and on a website that I will be launching soon. I am also thinking about extending it to other art capitals.

Beyond that, my “research” moves in several different directions. I work with various types and genres of photography, from portraiture to still life to abstract images, and I choose a range of different subjects to photograph. There are certain subjects and themes that capture my interest more than others, and there are ideas that are beginning to take shape. This is what I feel I can say about the present. I’m only 23, and there are so many projects and dreams ahead of me. Step by step, I’ll discover what I am capable of creating, and I will welcome whatever comes my way.