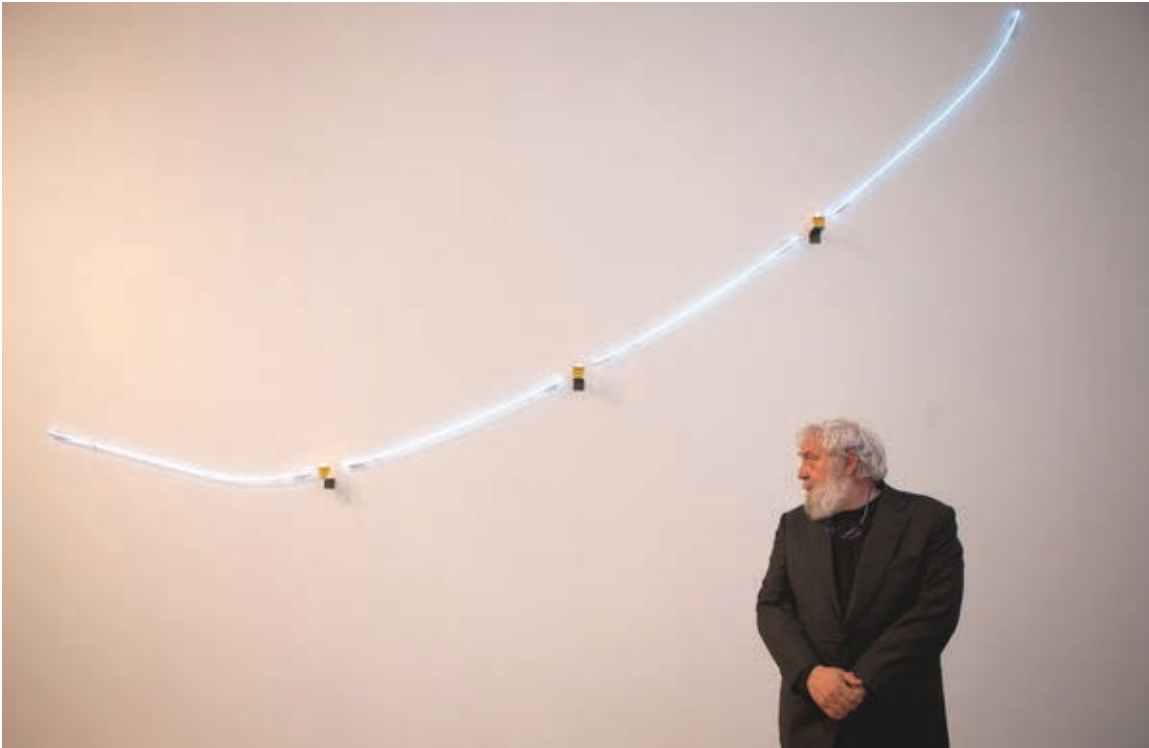


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Door Between Galleries Lets in an Artist's Vision

Pier Paolo Calzolari's Art to Be Shown at Boesky and Pace



Pier Paolo Calzolari, for whom two New York galleries will be as one, in front of "Untitled."
Josh Haner / The New York Times

By Randy Kennedy
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The big-money contemporary art world has grown so large that it often seems to have achieved nation-state status, while the galleries it comprises operate like feuding medieval principalities, constantly jousting for turf (Chelsea real estate), prestige (A-list artists) and money (from collectors' pockets).

So when Marianne Boesky, who owns a gallery on West 24th Street, approached the Pace Gallery, her much more powerful back-door neighbors on West 25th Street, with a proposal for a kind of concordat, she admits that she didn't do so with great affection.

Her ambivalence turned out to be justified: not long after, she said, Pace "poached" one of her most prominent artists, Yoshitomo Nara. "There are some very interesting and, I guess, difficult dynamics between us," Ms. Boesky said.

But beginning on Saturday, the two galleries will breach the walls between them not only metaphorically, but physically as well, cutting a doorway through the abutting bricks to join their warehouselike spaces for the sake of a single artist who has not shown in the United States for more than 20 years.



Mr. Calzolari's "Scala (con Piuma)," or "Stairway (With Feather)," a "frozen structure."
MARIANNE BOESKY GALLERY

For a month the two galleries will join forces to show a large selection of work by Pier Paolo Calzolari, a semi-reclusive 69-year-old Italian who is something of a revered mythical figure, even in Europe.

Among the original members of the Arte Povera movement of the 1960s — literally translated as “poor art,” partly because the work sometimes employed humble, even ephemeral materials — Mr. Calzolari, who trained as a painter, distinguished himself through his deep suspicion of the avant-garde’s reflexive rejection of the past.

While his work shared many similarities with that of his fellow so-called poveristi, it veered in a much more eccentric direction, bringing in elements of Renaissance painting, of the quasi-animism of St. Francis and of the Romantic movement, in pieces that looked positively florid beside much postmodern art of the era.

He has used materials like salt, running water, open flame, moss, roses, feathers, eggs and tobacco leaves. His calling card, a kind of visual obsession, is frost, which he makes by connecting small, humming refrigeration units to some of his works with a thin copper tube, causing the art to turn bright white as it freezes on the wall.

The fascination is not with ice, he has explained, but with a kind of pure whiteness he saw as a young man in Venice, when sunlight washed over marble walls along the Riva degli Schiavoni, a color he felt it would be wrong to try to replicate in paint.

“Calzolari, it seems to me, is always searching for the absolute, expressed through natural elements, like moss and lead, or natural phenomena, like fire and ice,” said James Rondeau, chairman of contemporary art at the Art Institute of Chicago, which has one of the rare Calzolari works in an American public collection. “His works so often engage in a kind of alchemy, linking him to older, European traditions.”

Mr. Calzolari exhibited actively in Europe and in the United States for more than two decades, but in the late 1980s he retreated to Fossombrone, a small town in the Marche region of central Italy, and he has spent much of the last 25 years working there, mostly out of the public eye, in what he calls a process of “getting to know myself better.”

Ms. Boesky knew of his work only slightly. But a few years ago a young artist she represents, Jay Heikes, who had seen several Calzolari pieces while working as an art handler at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis,

sang Mr. Calzolari's praises. And after delving into his career, Ms. Boesky set out to track him down. Instead of sending an e-mail, she wrote him an old-fashioned letter, saying that she was determined to show his work in America again.

"A month or two later," she recalled, "I got a letter back that said, 'Why?' Not 'Do you want to talk?' or anything like that, but just 'Why?'"

Eventually, like a coy lover, he invited her to Italy. But when she and an assistant arrived at his rural studio in Fossombrone after a day and half of traveling, a studio employee came to the door to say that Mr. Calzolari was ill and would not be able to keep the appointment after all. They were about to leave when Mr. Calzolari himself, looking grave beneath a thick white beard and a shock of white hair, emerged, grudgingly let them in and spent the next nine hours talking about his work.

In a recent Skype interview from his studio, conducted with the help of an interpreter, Mr. Calzolari said that he decided to begin showing more again in Europe and now — after submitting to Ms. Boesky's overtures — in America, partly because "I think I got a bit lonely, after a while, being in dialogue only with myself and with the collectors who know my work well."

He described the lush, hilly part of Italy where he has long made his home as "a nest for my soul," a place where the contemporary art world usually seems like a distant planet.

"The people here live suspended in a dream of a magnificent past, a dream of the Duke of Montefeltro in the 15th century," he said. "And I like that. They like me because they so deeply love things that are made well."

Marc Glimcher, Pace's president, said he agreed to combine his space with Ms. Boesky's partly because he, too, felt that Mr. Calzolari's work would be a revelation if the show — titled "When the dreamer dies, what happens to the dream?" — could be mounted the way Mr. Calzolari wanted, with abundant room to show a substantial amount of interrelated work made over three decades.

"This isn't about it being morally good to be friendly with other galleries or about it being good strategically to collaborate," Mr. Glimcher said. "It's just about it being so much more interesting, art-wise, to do something like this when the opportunity comes along."

He added: "I'm very happy to take credit in this case for something I really don't deserve any for." (He said that his gallery had indeed taken Mr. Nara from Ms. Boesky but added that it happened with "honesty, all very aboveboard.")

Mr. Calzolari, asked if he had any anxiety about returning to the American art world on such a large stage, recounted advice once given to him by his friend the actor Marcello Mastroianni, who liked to introduce himself as a comedian instead of an actor, to lower expectations.

"I'm trying to think of how I should introduce myself," he said.

He hoped the show would not be seen as a summing up of his career, he said, then added, with a laugh, "It will be a retrospective only because I'm old."