

Living under the leaf

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LIVING UNDER THE LEAF

Kateřina Krupičková, Magdaléna Zemanová, Martin Zwahlen

On October 17, 2014, Sales Director Ms. Cheyenne Westphal is getting ready at the backstage of Sotheby's, London, for the annual autumn auction called *The Italian Sale*. It is dedicated to Italian post-war art. There are 49 lots to sell, all from private collectors.

The auction begins with a painting by Giacomo Balla, estimated at 180 000 to 250 000 GBP. It sells way higher for 338 500 GBP. Lot number two by Giorgio Morandi sells exactly at double the price. The unexpected interest raises a lot of noise in the auction hall, everybody is impatiently awaiting the upcoming highlights. «The first lot from Giobatta Meneguzzo's collection: Enrico Castellani, *Superficie Bianca*»⁽¹⁾, the chairman announces. The work sells at even more than double the pre-sale estimate.

The auction sets a new record in the history of Italian art. The selling price of Castellani's painting compares to that of a 15th century Botticelli. In an interview, Ms. Westphal reveals the reason for the success: «The whole history of the wonderful house inspired our clients.»⁽²⁾

I THE HOUSE

The origin of the house Ms. Westphal referred to can be found in the May 1964 issue of the *Domus* magazine, in which Gio Ponti published an article about one of his own designs. Ponti was a well-known Italian architect and founder of the magazine. In his article, model pictures and executive plans on a 1:50 scale show a house with a low and overlapping roof in the shape of a leaf. The floor plan includes views through the house, the sun projection over the day, the ventilation concept and designs for built-in furniture. A few pages later, the description reads: «Ceramic is the main topic of this small house: the roof, all floors, even outside, are in ceramic, ... There is no maintenance, everything is clean and shiny, and eternal. There is no furniture; furnishing is installed in numerous and roomy cavities in the walls.»⁽³⁾

The original intention was to replicate the house. «...it was thought that on the slopes of a hill there would be two or three such houses, and that the highest house could see only the roof of another one below, and how it would be wonderful to see these clean, shiny surfaces, colourful in their design, the ceramic

gardens, bloomed forever in the green of trees: the surfaces which mirror the sky and clouds, and, at night, the moon.»⁽⁴⁾

«Raise the leaf, you will discover a beautiful plant.»⁽⁵⁾, Ponti wrote. Delivering the image of a beetle seeking refuge under a leaf, he playfully shaped the house in an organic way, and covered it with two dominant wings. Through this natural metaphor, the architect referred to the archetypal concept of human shelter. He distilled the nurturing and protective function of a home and expressed it in a gentle way with a sense of freedom and humour. *Lo Scarabeo Sotto La Foglia* (The Beetle under the Leaf), also called Villa Anguissola, was a project originally commissioned by one of Ponti's clients, possibly of that name, who generously offered the plans to the readers of *Domus*. However, it was not intended as a permanent family home, but rather as a vacation home: including three hotel-like bedrooms with showers and sheltered outdoor areas as common spaces.

II THE INITIATOR

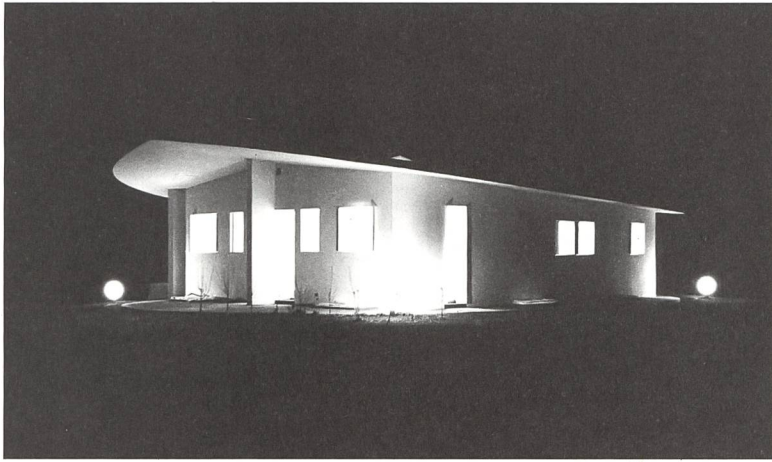
Giobatta Meneguzzo, a surveyor from the small town of Malo in the North of Italy, got himself a subscription to the *Domus* magazine after completing his apprenticeship. He was excited about architecture and was looking for an inspiration to build a house, where he could accommodate his family and his growing art collection. After coming across the concept and the detailed plans, Meneguzzo contacted Ponti, got his permission and started to construct the house.

In order to adapt the house to his own and his family's needs, Meneguzzo hired a designer whose interior designs he had also seen in the *Domus* magazine: Nanda Vigo. They met at an exhibition, talked about the house, and she offered to work on it. «There was this chap interested in building a house and asked if I could make an adaptation»⁽⁶⁾, she called Ponti, and got his blessing. From 1965 to 1968 Vigo developed and designed the house at the foot of the Alps in the Vicenza province.

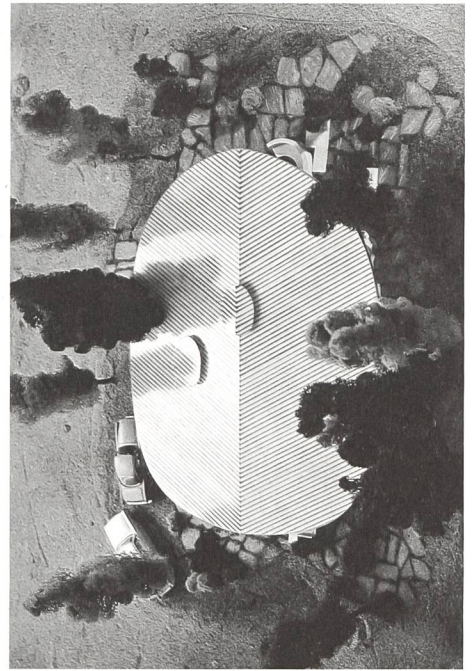
III THE DESIGNER

A pioneer in radical design of the sixties and seventies, Vigo designed a unique interior for the house. On the

A



B



C



A Completed house. Copyright: Casali/Domus
C View from the bed to the «conversation pool». Copyright: Casali/Domus

B Published model picture, 1964. Copyright: Casali/Domus

D



E



D View from the entrance hall towards the staircase.
Copyright: Casali/Domus

E The underground art gallery space. Copyright:
Adam Stech, courtesy of Adam Stech

one hand, her project stuck to the principles praised by Ponti: the outside appearance, built-in furniture, the use of tiles and the concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, where the design of the house is in a close relationship to the objects that inhabit it. On the other hand, she brought her own significant contribution. In order to satisfy the needs of both the family and the art collection, Vigo combined the entrance, living room and the bedroom in a central T-shape space. «...only a woman could have created this *nativity room*,»⁽⁷⁾ Vigo quoted in an interview Ponti's reaction to her choice to put a double bed in the living room. On the left side, next to the central space is a kitchen and a dining room and the children's bedroom on the opposite side.

In the middle of the house, between the entrance and the bed, a spiral staircase leads underground. There, Vigo designed an additional space for art objects. Straight above the staircase she placed a bubble-shaped skylight and at the foot of the stairs she laid a black shell-like object, creating a vertical axis in the house. Vigo, a creative thinker of her own category, with interest in ancient civilizations, cosmos and metaphysical symbols, produced a staircase descending from the light of the casual world to the depths of the underworld. The staircase and the built-in furniture are covered in grey *faux fur*, contrasting the ever-present white reflective tiles and transforming the objects that grow out of the floor or ceiling into autonomous forms. The artificial lighting designed by Vigo included neon plastic tubes running between the walls and the ceiling. The light is amplified by the reflection of the tiles, creating a continuous and luminous environment with the effect of dematerialization.

Especially for the house, Vigo used her connections to Milanese artists and commissioned art objects. For the narrow entrance hall, she let Enrico Castellani cover the wall with an almost 3-meter-long canvas. On the opposite wall, she placed a mirror to optically enlarge the space. Julio LeParc produced a printed glass sculpture hanging above the sofa area. Reaching beyond the mere decoration, the sculpture created a «conversation pool» outlined by ephemeral fragmented reflections. Vigo also mediated the purchase of art pieces by Lucio Fontana, Agostino Bonalumi and other artists.

Although Vigo wanted to show Ponti her modifications, he refused to see the house before it was completed. *Lo Scarabeo Sotto La Foglia* turned out to be the only work that Ponti designed but whose execution he did not oversee.

IV THE ECHO

The Grand Opening was announced six years after the house was finished. On the program there was Demetrio

Stratos, a famous musician with his band, and other art performances in the garden. First reactions to the house's interior were heard: the local writer Luigi Meneghello described it as «something between a kindly stylized dream and a joke,»⁽⁸⁾ Artist Paolino Lomazzi compared it to the public toilets beneath Piazza del Duomo⁽⁹⁾ and local news focused on the family, pushing words like «scandalous», «revolutionary» or «radical». The building raised amazement and curiosity among the locals. Accusations were made by critics and architects: «How do you live in a house without doors? It is crazy! All that ceramic and neon coating. Absurd!»⁽¹⁰⁾ Even the church passed comments: the local priest denounced the bed set in the living room. Meanwhile Meneguzzo extended his passion for collecting to newspaper articles, photographs and recordings related to his house and the art collection.

The influence of the house spread beyond the local art life. The interior with its visually appealing and symbolic qualities appeared in a movie called *The Night Evelyn came out of the grave* (1971): in the final scene, the camera accompanies the actors down the furry staircase to *hell* where the heroine comes back to life. Later, the fashion brand Fendi reproduced the same stairs as a part of a catwalk. And in 2007, *Wallpaper magazine* chose the house as a photographic set for the «Super Furry» series.

As Meneguzzo's collection grew, he decided to dedicate some of it to the public. He turned a former agricultural storage into a museum, which opened in 1978. The space accommodated over thousand art pieces and an exhibition of Meneguzzo's press-cuttings. The Casa-blanca Museum, as he named it, comprises valuable artworks from the 60s to 90s including Beuys, Serra, Manzoni, Boetti, Agostino Bonalumi, Christo, Ontani, Vedova and others.

When the collector reached the age of 86 he started to worry about the future of his collection and made the controversial decision to sell the art pieces from his own home.

V AFTERWORD

Meneguzzo is no longer an art collector but rather an archivist of his own art collection. He continues to look for articles mentioning his name and echoes of the house. After living for almost four decades under the leaf, he is sure to have taken the right decision: «Considered by those who live there, it was the best thing done in life.»⁽¹¹⁾

Nanda Vigo passed away on March 16, 2020. In her late interviews she couldn't hide her disappointment at her former client's decision to auction off the objects selected by her for the house.

Kateřina Krupičková, born 1991, earned her diploma at the Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design in Prague in 2017. She received the position of a visiting student at ETH Zurich. Currently she works as an architect and lives in Basel.

Magdaléna Zemanová, born 1980, earned her Diploma of Journalism in Prague and a Master's degree in Social and Cultural Anthropology at the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam in 2006. Magdaléna works as a scenographer and writer, exploring the dialectics of visual arts and literature.

Martin Zwahlen, born 1990, earned his architecture diploma at ETH Zurich in 2017 at the chair of Tom Emerson. He works now as a landscape architect in Basel.