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## **The Italian Academy at Columbia University**

In a small corner of Morningside, a vision of the future is unfurling as a group of intellectuals transforms their small cultural studies forum into an authentic crucible, bringing academics together with their peers and the educated public with the goal of doing real work by interdisciplinary means. Founded at Columbia University in 1991, the Italian Academy is a unique institution, "conceived as a center for advanced research in areas relating to Italian culture, science, and society... to provide a locus for collaborative projects between senior Italian and American scholars, particularly those open to interdisciplinary research." What makes the Academy profoundly interesting, though, is the extent to which this abstract-seeming mission has taken purchase, fostering a series of extraordinarily productive academic collaborations that have succeeded not only in their scholarship, but also in their accessibility and meaningful value to the educated public at large.

In parallel with its academic activities, the Academy maintains a library, lecture series, and events calendar that run the gamut of Italian culture and achievements, with an exhibition of Beatrice Pediconi's photographs scheduled to hang from February 15th through March 31st. Her abstract works instigate an evaluation of the physical mechanisms underlying both human sight and photographic inscription that constitutes a sort of temporal tomography. Galactic and nuanced, each work offers a sublime experience strung between the infinitesimal detail that emphasizes the ephemerality of their creation and a monolithic, all-over image that insists on its singularity and permanence. The centrality of aesthetic rigor and an explicit, formalistic focus on the nature of the photographic medium present in Pediconi's work are an important illustration of the institution's commitment to intellectualism, as well as an elegant synecdoche for the Academy itself and the dependence of successful interdisciplinary projects on those same principles.

By design, such projects are fostered in three fellowships that define the core of the Academy's goings-on. The Alexander Bodini Fellowships in adolescent psychiatry, culture and religion, and global development

and finance bring together post-doctoral researchers from around the world, while the Premio New York sponsors two Italian artists to spend a year working at Columbia—Pietro Ruffo and Marinella Senatore in 2011. The third fellowship is attached to the Art & Neuroscience Project, which hosts the most exciting, outgoing, and accessible collaborations found at the Academy—the essential kernel at the root of that unfurling future.

Odd companions at first glance, art and neuroscience have proven in this endeavor to offer one another extraordinary catalysis, whether in applying the techniques of neuroscience to design a memory-emulating approach to the study of cultural history, or by investigating the unique stimuli associated with art experience in pursuit of identifying and understanding the physical, neural substrate of thought and response. The tremendously successful Neurotechniques conference held in December 2010 showcased the creative capacity of such an ideological connection: taking up the topics of "Mind, Brain, and Behavior," the symposium highlighted connections between discrete scientific approaches to related problems from several fields, the distinct philosophical responses to a shared problem—for example, the understanding of visual attentiveness—and the hope for new innovations that could precipitate from adapting discoveries across the disciplines.

As does the Italian Academy itself, the Art & Neuroscience Project compels us because it captures how, in this moment of our history, interdisciplinary work has become the most humanistic of all projects. Crying out from a precipice of hope and discovery, our struggle to extend ourselves further into the unknown has prompted the realization that art and neuroscience share a mighty goal—elucidating the rapt power and inestimable fragility of that which we call consciousness.

— Christopher Graffeo

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