



By Grace Cain / Photographer Filippo Bamberghi

From *editing* magazines to *befriending* the Memphis Group, *creative* companionship has always been vital for *Carla Sozzani*

A shared journey

I'm going to begin at the end with my final question to Italian gallerist, designer and editor Carla Sozzani – although, truth be told, it comes out sounding more like an apology than a query. Having just enjoyed an intellectual chat about beauty and the true purpose of art, it feels a little lowbrow to suddenly ask about her cat. But the green-eyed Bengal, crouching like a surfer at the crest of the undulating Roberto Matta sofa, quietly refuses to be ignored. So, I ask about the cat.

The designer's head – poised like a Modigliani sculpture between two earrings that look more like parts of a machine than jewellery – tilts slightly to accommodate her amused smile. "Lola was Azzedine's cat," she says warmly, referring to the late, great fashion designer Azzedine Alaïa, with whom she shared a close friendship. "He had six or seven." Sozzani

took ownership of Lola following Alaïa's death in 2017. "And she's still here."

Lola is part of what Sozzani describes as the "layers and layers of life" that compose the art-filled white-walled Milanese apartment that she has called home since 1986. Of those layers, a sizeable slice must be ascribed to Sozzani's partner – although that's not how she introduces him. "The mixed-media artworks on the walls are mainly by Kris Ruhs, an incredible American artist," she says. "We have been sharing life and work for over 30 years." How unusually wonderful it is (I think) that Sozzani doesn't reduce Ruhs to his relationship to her, as people so often do when they offhandedly say 'my partner' or 'my friend'?

As for the work they share, that would be 10 Corso Como, a concept store and exhibition space that Sozzani initially

founded as a gallery in 1990. At that time, her aim was simply to display the works of photographers and designers she'd fallen in love with during her 20-year career as a magazine editor (her CV includes the role of founding editor-in-chief of *Elle Italia* in 1987, and she also worked on special editions of *Vogue Italia*, where her younger sister, the legendary Franca Sozzani, was editor-in-chief until her death in 2016).

"Editing was the only thing I knew," Sozzani recalls. "And I had always wanted to put together a living magazine. Instead of having pages to turn, people would be able to share in the experience of a table, a chair, a dress, a candle, a book... everything I consider interesting." Thus, 10 Corso Como began to evolve. In 1991, Sozzani opened a boutique that sold fashion-forward >

Carla Sozzani's home is an Aladdin's Cave of beloved artwork, such as the piece on the wall behind her by artist (and partner) Kris Ruhs



lines from the likes of Comme des Garçons and (of course) Alaïa, as well as books on art and design. A lush garden café and restaurant followed seven years later. “I felt it was important to create a place where people could talk and exchange opinions,” she explains. “This was before the internet, of course, but even now I feel that using a screen is not the same as meeting and living an experience together.”

Over time, the philosophy underpinning Sozzani’s approach to decorating her home has also come to define her business. As she reflects, 10 Corso Como comes from a “very personal point of view. For me, it’s very important to be surrounded by what I consider to be beautiful. Fashion and design are very closely linked, of course, but you might only look at what you are wearing once or twice in a day. Otherwise, you spend most of your time experiencing what you have around you: your furniture, your souvenirs, your home.”

The energy that Sozzani radiates is entirely calm and cerebral, so it comes as no surprise to hear that the layers of her apartment are the result of a gradual evolution rather than any dramatic renovations. “I’ve never understood anyone who asks other people to decorate their home. It’s always been a mystery to me,” she muses. “For me, 90 per cent of the joy is in searching for things I like and putting them together. There is this moment of enthusiasm when you find the piece you’ve been searching for and bring it home.”

So what’s on Sozzani’s radar? “I love the Danish designer Arne Jacobsen,” she says, the whisper of a smile lighting up her face. “Especially his Egg chair. I have only two now, but there was a moment where my entire living room was made up of Egg chairs, all different colours. I consider it to be



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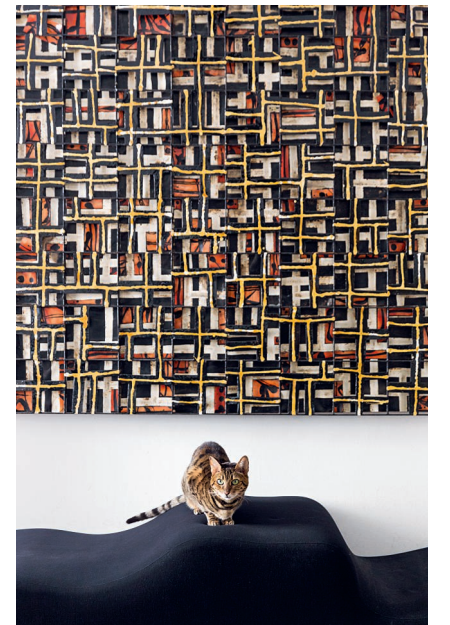
Clockwise from above: Myriad pieces punctuate the hallway’s clean lines; Sozzani’s passion for design is well evidenced by thousands of books on the subject; bone-like pendant lights crown Ruhs’ striking glass dining table



the perfect design. It feels so cosy and protective, like being in the womb of your mother. At the same time, the line is so pure and so precise that it’s timeless; it could be a chair from the past, but it could also be the chair of the future.”

The reasons behind her love for the mid-20th-century French designer Pierre Paulin are much the same. As well as having Paulin’s aptly named ribbon chair, Sozzani is also the proud owner of his Osaka sofa. “It’s very long, like a snake,” she says, slowly tracing an arc in the air to illustrate her point. “I like that one very much.” And chairs are something of a recurring theme... certainly, no-one will be short of a place to sit in her hallway, where one of Joe Colombo’s radical tube chairs appears to have rolled to a halt beside a Plexiglas chaise longue and concave silver seat, both creations by Ruhs. “Kris makes lots of prototypes of chairs for exhibitions, and sometimes I cannot resist taking them home,” Sozzani admits.

Moving through the pair’s shared home, Ruhs’ artistic fingerprints are not difficult to detect. A cluster of his bone-like ceramic pendant lights hang low over the couple’s dining table, a glass-topped piece with a serpentine wooden base (also by Ruhs). “That table is a one-of-a-kind piece. I think he made it in 1990,” Sozzani recalls. “It was one of the first things I changed in the house, actually. I just think it’s so beautiful.” Elsewhere, crowds of Ruhs’ raku ceramics gather on tabletops and kitchen shelves, their crackled surfaces a result of the traditional Japanese technique that involves pulling the pottery from the fire while it’s still hot. Some are organic abstract forms; the other creatures are what I would imagine you’d get if you crossed Pablo Picasso’s *Guernica* with Tim Burton’s *Beetlejuice* and then fired the resultant object in a kiln. >



From top: Framing piles of Sozzani’s books are her Pierre Paulin and Isamu Noguchi sofas; connections to Azzedine Alaïa run deep – not least through Lola the Bengal cat, inherited from the fashion designer in 2017

The Collector

“I like to mix,” says Sozzani. “Putting a Kris Ruhs side table beside an Isamu Noguchi sofa, for example. And then I have Miss Blanche.” No, not she of *A Streetcar Named Desire* fame – though Shiro Kuramata’s transparent chair is actually named after Tennessee Williams’ protagonist. “It’s absolutely full of poetry – the way that the roses are trapped inside the acrylic resin as though they are floating in the air,” Sozzani says softly. “I knew Shiro Kuramata when he was alive, and he was such a poetic designer. An artist.”

Back in the 1980s, Kuramata was a member of the Memphis Group, a postmodern design collective led by the architect Ettore Sottsass, who happened to be good friends with – you guessed it – Sozzani. “I was lucky enough to be very close to the Memphis Group via Ettore and his wife, Barbara,” she remembers. “It was an amazing time. It’s not easy to create a movement like that, and I’m very happy to see that it’s now become super-appreciated.”

Speaking of old friends, one can only imagine the fashion treasures hidden in Sozzani’s wardrobe. “I do have a lot of clothes – more than I need, that’s for sure,” she confesses. “But I think that’s [the case with] all the people who discovered fashion during the same period that I did. We were young at a time when all your clothes had to be made for you. Then came the ’60s and ready-to-wear designs from the likes of Yves Saint Laurent and Emilio



Clockwise from left: Gaetano Pesce’s iconic 1969 Up armchair carries a political meaning addressing female oppression, its shape depicting a woman attached to a ball and chain; an exotic-animal menagerie occupies the walls of the kitchen; one of Kris Ruhs’ sculptures overhangs the artwork-laden breakfast bar



Pucci... I bought so much Pucci!” She grins, her eyes lighting up as she warms to her subject. “Suddenly, you could go into a shop and buy and buy and buy, rather than just visiting a dressmaker twice a year. From that point on, it felt like fashion was changing every day. Then, in the 1980s and ’90s, there were so many amazing brands, like Yohji Yamamoto, Vivienne Westwood and Comme des Garçons.”

And Alaïa? “I do have a big collection of Alaïa,” Sozzani confirms. “We were friends for over 40 years, and we worked together for 20. The first time I took pictures of his clothes, in 1981, I knew it was something quite incredible. His leather pieces with the eyelets... it was revolutionary. Nobody had done anything like it.” Today, Sozzani is president of the Fondation Azzedine Alaïa. “It’s time to give his clothes to everyone,” she says.

And with that, I’ll end by returning to the start: how did Sozzani first develop such a discerning eye? “I grew up in a family where there was no real definition of beauty,” she explains, recalling her parents’ interest in classical art and architecture (weekends for the young Sozzani sisters often involved visits to churches, but these were trips motivated by art rather than any religious piety). “Because of this, I have never seen the difference between architecture, furniture, paintings, fashion... I view it all through one eye.”

She pauses for thought, then continues: “Walter Gropius’ Bauhaus manifesto says that there is no difference between the artist and the artisan, and I love how that connects all the world’s craftspeople and their creations. If you are drawn to a certain piece of art, I really believe you can be drawn to a chair in the same way. You just have to look for the thing that gets you – that sense of beauty.” □