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## ***A.B.O. and M.D.*** ***A portable case study***

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With surgical precision, the exhibition *A.B.O. THEATRON. Art or Life* dissects the consenting patient Achille Bonito Oliva into three parts. After all, as the great Caesar wrote, “*Gallia est omnis divisa in partes tres*” (“All of Gaul is divided in three parts”). With less bellicose intentions, though perhaps not without pulsating desires for expansion, the curators of the exhibition, the first to identify him as an ambit of study, decided to treat Bonito Oliva and the multiform intellectual output he has generated as a territory of conquest to be mapped out, divided up, and then shared out (and studied).

Identified as a Curatorial Section, an Encyclopaedic Section, and a Behavioral Section, focused on his exhibitions, his writings, and his numerous public performances respectively, these three regions are the psycho-geography around which the exhibition is arranged. However, precisely because it is in fact neither a surgical operation nor a military campaign, the three-part architecture of the project behaves as a porous, organic, vibrant structure, endowed with elastic meshes that shift and change.

To make everything even more fluid and slippery, the unavoidable question arises: “Who is curating who, here?” Rendering unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, being the brilliant curator that he is, Achille Bonito Oliva has multiplied himself for the occasion of this exhibition. Not only present in the title through the acronym A.B.O., which, like a brand, embodies the public persona that he presents on stage (referring to Groucho Marx and Totò he calls himself “Marxist and Totòist”), Bonito Oliva also plays the double role of curator and “curatee,” generously sharing the first role with others and occupying the second with dizzying, totalizing breadth.

Having set out my premise—the “light” tone of which is just a way to invite the reader to get at least as far as the end of this paragraph, which I cherish—it only remains for me to get to the point and state the specific issue that I wish to deal with here and that has long fascinated me: Achille Bonito Oliva and Marcel Duchamp—that is, mirror-like, M.D. and A.B.O. The subject is extremely wide, but I believe it can become a useful case study and allow us, through a specific example, to present the mechanisms that regulate the workings of the “art of criticism” promoted by Bonito Oliva in opposition to more traditional “art criticism.” I will stick to a portable, travel-friendly version of the subject. But in the ambit of this vast project—consisting of the physical exhibition at the Castello di Rivoli and this paper catalog—that aims to retrace the salient moments of the long and complex intellectual adventure of Bonito Oliva and consign them to the digitalized generations of the present and the future, I believe that this mention is necessary. It also helps found a broader perspective, one that oversteps the well-known interconnectedness between Bonito Oliva and the Transavantgarde since he came up with the happy neologism in 1979.<sup>1</sup>

I will start from the relationship between Bonito Oliva and the movement he theorized and promoted—a powerful, indissoluble, incontestable relationship. In most contemporary art histories,

Transavantgarde is still regarded as one of the last—perhaps the very last—artistic movement that can be defined as such, complete with its own label and a specific intellectual leader recognized by the artists. There is something mythographical in this image: Bonito Oliva heading a small band of artists including Chia, Clemente, Cucchi, De Maria, and Paladino, all lined-up at the last outpost of a recognizable universe: mighty super-heroes balancing between the presumed order of the story of twentieth-century art and the multiform explosion of individual languages that characterizes the last decade of the century up to the present, a nomadic expansion for which they are partly responsible. Without taking anything away from this billboard-like image, we must move to one side and not only view it frontally, to make sure that the shadow it casts does not hide other crucial chapters in the intellectual adventure of Bonito Oliva, which are at times neglected exactly because they were too close in time.

Bonito Oliva published *Vita di Marcel Duchamp* in 1976, the year that also saw the publication of *L'ideologia del traditore. Arte, maniera, manierismo* and *Europe/America. The different avant-gardes*. I believe that the *Vita* can be considered the crux around which his previous and subsequent explorations of Duchamp revolve.

Among earlier studies, the first came in 1973, when Bonito Oliva curated the exhibition *La delicata scacchiera: Marcel Duchamp, 1902–1968* at the Palazzo Reale in Naples. With over 250 works, ranging from previously unseen youthful drawings to the famous ready-mades and numerous studies for the *Large Glass*, including rare documentary material, the event was a major anthological exhibition accompanied by an exhaustive catalog containing a text by Bonito Oliva, another by Arturo Schwarz, and detailed descriptions of all the works on display. A second moment of analysis came in 1975 when Bonito Oliva wrote the article “On the posing of Marcel Duchamp” for the catalog *Su Marcel Duchamp*, published by Nicola Incisetto’s Framart Studio in Naples on the occasion of the gallery’s inaugural exhibition. As for the studies that came after 1976, we should mention at least his editing in 1978 of *Marcel Duchamp. Mercante del segno* published by Leric Editore, a volume that featured the first Italian translations of Duchamp’s writings. In 1997, costa & nolan published *M.D. A.B.O.*, a re-edition of the 1976 book with several additional texts, including “Il mercante del silenzio,” written in 1982–84, and two new texts, the titles of which can be translated as “Indifferently (preface in the form of a dialog between M.D. and A.B.O.)” and “Viceversely (afterword in the form of a triologue between M.D. and T. and the silence of A.B.O.),” which open and close the book respectively. Written in the form of creative dialogs that stage hypothetical encounters between A.B.O., the French artist, and Totò, “Indifferently” and “Viceversely” take inspiration from the interpretation of the well-known expression “*a prescindere*” (regardless) of the Italian Prince of Laughter as an equivalent of the Duchampian ready-made. To complete this initial survey and to arrive at the present, it should be added that on various occasions the Italian editions of books by foreign scholars, including Michel Sanouillet and Bernard Marcadé, reprinted texts on Duchamp by Bonito Oliva as authoritative prefaces, drawing especially on the essays contained in the *Vita* of 1976.<sup>2</sup>

Before we look more closely at *Vita di Marcel Duchamp* we are faced once again by the obvious question: why is Bonito Oliva interested in the artist? The innovative exhibitions that defined his activity from 1970 onwards paint a picture of a curator attracted above all by artists of his own time. Nor could it be said that in 1976 Duchamp, who had died in 1968 and had been the subject of important international retrospectives, such as the one at the Tate Gallery in London in 1966, was a forgotten artist for whom Bonito Oliva could exercise the sort of *jus primae noctis* that sometimes marks relations between curators and artists, with the former claiming to have “discovered” the

otherwise hidden talents of the latter. In Italy, right from the very first exhibition at his gallery in Milan in 1954, Arturo Schwarz had established a strong partnership with the French artist that saw them, in an epoch-making development in 1964, bound by contract for the production of twelve ready-mades: an undertaking that finally gave the artist recognizable control over his own work, defining the criteria for its reproduction. Another way of understanding Bonito Oliva's reasons may thus be found in looking at how and through what path he came to Duchamp.

Dedicated by Bonito Oliva to Mimma and Vettor Pisani, *Vita di Marcel Duchamp* is the second volume in the series "Arte della critica," edited by Bonito Oliva for Massimo Marani, an enlightened publisher from Rome (who the previous year had, among other things, published the now rare *Linguaggio è guerra* by Fabio Mauri, with a text by Filiberto Menna). With a title that sets out a program clearly coined by Bonito Oliva with the intention of revising the very concept of art criticism, the series had begun in 1975 with *Lo scorrevole*.

Containing a text by Bonito Oliva, black and white photographs by Elisabetta Catalano, and color photographs by Mimma Pisani, this radical 60-page volume was devoted entirely to the work of the same name by Vettor Pisani. A machine formed from a pulley with metal wheels that runs on a horizontal steel cable fixed in turn to a lead, in the form of a chain culminating in a collar, the work is related to *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*, the celebrated *Large Glass* that occupied Duchamp from 1915 to 1923 and then reappeared in the form of drawings, texts, and notes at many other moments of his activity. In its various incarnations, first animal and then human, *Lo scorrevole* had already had a long acquaintance with Bonito Oliva, who displayed it first in July 1970 in the exhibition *Amore mio* in Montepulciano and then in December of the same year in *Vitalità del negativo* at the Palazzo delle Esposizioni in Rome. An innovative "self-exhibition" to which all the self-convened artists had in turn extended the invitation to others, *Amore mio* was the first group show in which Pisani took part. Hidden before that year in his meaningful silence, he had been invited by Michelangelo Pistoletto.

In the catalog of *Amore mio*, a letter signed by Pistoletto describes a dream in which Duchamp says: "I am dead you know, but my art must continue and I have chosen you as my heir and my continuator, because you are alive; I leave you as the total heir of my work so that you may pursue it in my place." The letter also claims that Vettor Pisani had experienced the same dream.<sup>3</sup>

Duchamp is the obsession that defines Pisani's work from the beginning. He is the distiller of esoteric alchemies that hide unmentionable secrets, in some of which Pisani recognizes his own. However, even in the polysemic ambiguity of his works, Pisani does not omit the name of the French artist—indeed, he declares it explicitly right from the title of his first exhibition, *Maschile, femminile e androgino. Incesto e cannibalismo in Marcel Duchamp*, held in April 1970 at the Galleria La Salita in Rome. So, a sort of organic path unfolds in these artists' own contemporary present, with Pistoletto bringing Vettor Pisani to Bonito Oliva, like a gift, in *Amore mio*, followed by Pisani (who was awarded the Premio Pino Pascali by Bonito Oliva in the spring of 1970) bearing another gift—that is, Marcel Duchamp.

However, as anthropology teaches, the gift is never the same for the giver and the receiver. Which brings me to the 1976 book *Vita di Marcel Duchamp*. Bibliophiles will not fail to notice the choice of cover image. On the front of the substantial 240-page volume is a color photo of an ageing Duchamp sitting on a worn-out blue armchair. In the foreground is a chess board, whose grid famously enchanted the artist. The setting is reassuring: Duchamp's private home in Greenwich Village, New York, a comfortable bourgeois apartment complete with house plant and ornaments.

Equally bourgeois are the artist's clothes, an example of the casual comfort of those who spend many hours sitting at home. And yet this grandpa, smoking a cigar in probable defiance of his doctor's orders, is far from reassuring. He is looking at us straight in the eye and smiling, or rather sneering, as if anticipating the arduous afternoon he has prepared for us. He welcomes us into his private space, but has placed a chess board between himself and us, occupying the entire foreground. We are invited, or rather challenged, to play. All the pieces are in their starting positions. He has the whites. We have the blacks. In the background we can make out another chess board, as if to say, even if we get past this first level there will be another, and then another, in an exhausting tournament from which we will probably emerge defeated, unable to read the strategy of our skilled opponent.

The reason why I have dwelled in such detail on the cover photo is because the visual part forms the larger section of the book, intentionally separated from the textual part that precedes it. If we begin to leaf through the volume from this full-fledged visual essay of 118 images, we notice that the selection of photos contains a prevalence of portraits of the artist. Some of them are well known, while others capture private moments. Previously unpublished, many images reached Bonito Oliva directly from the archives of Alexina "Teeny" Duchamp, the artist's widow. Among the selection, another group stands out: the sequence of iconic portraits taken by Ugo Mulas in 1965 during a trip to New York to record the art scene of the time.<sup>4</sup> The same Mulas photos had been published in 1973 in the catalog *La delicata scacchiera*, where they appear in the opening chapter, perhaps as a homage after the photographer's untimely death in March of the same year.<sup>5</sup>

"Foolishness," "The beauty of indifference," "One and All," "The Posing," and "The delicate chessboard" are the titles of the five texts that form the first part of the volume, while "The days of M.D.," a biographical note on the artist, closes the book. Each essay is a concise investigation of the theme stated in the title, forming separate chapters, without a numerical order. Compared to the visual essay, which with very few exceptions follows a chronological order, the texts seem to shun this constraint. Indeed, except for the notes on the quotations, mainly drawn from the fields of psychoanalysis, philosophy, and literature, Bonito Oliva does not include any dates and his analysis does not obey the customary temporal order and sequence of works that often constrain those who write about them. The very beginning of the first text in the book, "Foolishness," concerns the need to overcome the logical order of time and its tyranny. Setting out from Freud's *Thoughts for the Times on War and Death*, Bonito Oliva starts his investigation of Duchamp by discussing the announcement of immortality contained in the famous epitaph on the artist's tombstone in Rouen: "*D'ailleurs c'est toujours les autres qui meurent*" ("Besides, it's always the others who die"). Also through Lacan and Bataille, the chapter defines Duchamp as an "artist and sage, the bearer of critical awareness." Duchamp "refuses to rely only on the simple postulates of reason: Indeed, he complicates it within a perspective which wants to contain the visible and the invisible, the matter and the idea, the particular and the universal, the mechanical and the fluid, the Eros and the geometry, the archetype and the detail, the sublime and the absurd." Apart from the epitaph on his tombstone, in this chapter Bonito Oliva does not cite any of Duchamp's works, dwelling instead on the photographs that portray him: "In one photo, Duchamp reproduces all his melancholy and the state of the fool: the artist looking sideways in a foolish attitude, he who has always been lucid and knowing. This photograph is the visible X-ray of sublime frivolousness which rationally turns its own reasonableness into a Utopian dimension denying the evidence." And further on he addresses another image: "In another photo Duchamp sitting cloaked in a mantle which leaves only his head uncovered—the part of him which dared to turn reasonableness into something broader and more impossible, into foolishness. The sage, the new sage, reconquers an unheard-of imbecility that delegates to things the possibility of

contradiction.”

In Bonito Oliva’s intentional and rigorous distance from Duchamp’s works I believe we can detect the specific transformation undergone by the “gift of Duchamp” in its passage from the hands of Pisani to those of the art critic. The method described is common to the other texts that make up *Vita di Marcel Duchamp*. The second, “The beauty of indifference,” sets out from Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy* and, except for a quick mention of the *Large Glass* and the *Large Door*, via Flaubert, Derrida, and Wittgenstein it narrows its analysis on the photos that portray the artist, including one that shows him at 85, an age imagined but never reached by Duchamp. The text includes a passage that seems to provide a perfect gloss on the visual essay: “Duchamp’s photograph album is a sequence arranged with severe intentionality, where there is no improvisation but always the catalog and the posing: Marcel with his brothers, with his artist friends, with his sister Suzanne, on his wedding day, with the chessboard, and with nature. The photo becomes the confirmation of a life fully dedicated to language and, at the same time, contained in the stylish secret of a psychology which never lets itself be X-rayed or documented.” The same precise critical approach is evident in the chapter “One and All” and in the following “The Posing,” with further discussions of the photos of the artist, mentions of the *Large Glass*, and quotations from sources including Ernst Kris, the art historian who was the first, after Freud (whose great friend he was), to apply psychoanalysis to the history of art.

Going back to the concept of chronology, I would like to add few more considerations about the texts that make up *Vita di Marcel Duchamp*, whose analysis can provide further hints about the critic’s method. Each of the texts ends with the indication of the month and the year in which it was written: July 1976, June 1976, January 1976, September 1975, and June 1973. The sequence records the stages of an intellectual activity that proceeds by approaching its subject at different moments, even over several years, each time defining a precise point of view, allowing the identification of a further passage, in this case the preparation of the book, to gather the results obtained. Write, publish, re-publish—but never revise. This seems to be the mantra that underlies his practice. The last two essays in the book, “The Posing” and “The delicate chessboard” (the former initially found in the 1975 Studio Framart book, the latter in the catalog of the large exhibition at Palazzo Reale in Naples in 1973 and in subsequent publications), demonstrate how the author never modifies what he has already published, not even when he uses his own material for a new book. “Why should I? It’s already perfect as it is!” he might say (famously and narcissistically aware of his own value, though always able to provoke a liberating smile to raise our spirits). What I wish to emphasize here is his acknowledging of each text as a finished work, like a painting or a poem that, once revealed to the world, will probably arouse new interpretations but will maintain the initial form defined by its author. This seems to me to be a characteristic that clearly describes Bonito Oliva’s idea of the “art of criticism,” which the case study of Duchamp, among other things, demonstrates.

Re-publishing but not revising does not mean that Bonito Oliva has never returned to his work over the years to expand it in new directions, producing pages in the art of criticism that have in their turn become history of art. It is precisely from a reading of the last chapter of *Vita di Duchamp* of 1976—as we have seen, the first text on Duchamp published by Bonito Oliva in 1973—that a further door is thrown open. He writes: “The strategy followed by art is based on what I term the ‘ideology of the traitor.’ The ideology of the traitor is, of course, already a ‘betrayed ideology,’ devoid of the superstructural codes of any theory that purports to be the expression of group interests in order to attain the virgin force of subversive planning.”

Later he adds: “The artist has lost all ‘frontality’ with the world and has acquired a poisonous position

of ‘laterality’ from where he observes the reality that moves away from him along winding and unreachable paths outside of his sphere of influence.” Here then, already set down in the 1973 catalog on Duchamp, we see the emergence of a crucial concept in Bonito Oliva’s intellectual adventure, one that would culminate in the formulation of the Transavantgarde after being fully formulated and expressed in *L’ideologia del traditore* (also published, significantly, in 1976), the enlightened volume that outlines the absolutely contemporary character of Mannerism.

Duchamp does not disappear from Bonito Oliva’s horizon after 1976. He resurfaces, for example, in 1990, cited widely in the context of *Ubi Fluxus ibi motus 1990–1962*, an exhibition and catalog project that once again turns to the past to investigate the present. And I will conclude with a mention of what I believe is the most famous example of “ABOization”: the 1989 cover of the issue of *Frigidaire* that portrays him naked playing chess with a clothed woman, the actress Alessandra Vanzi. The photo is a clear citation of the celebrated picture that shows the clothed Duchamp as he plays chess with the naked young Eve Babitz in front of the *Large Glass*. Omnipresent to himself, Bonito Oliva had already posed for *Frigidaire* in the nude in 1981 for a feature article. More recently, in 2011, the magazine gave him the cover: rigorously in the nude, he is photographed in his home in Rome, without a female counterpart and without a chess board.

As he has stated in numerous interviews, these photos in which he shows himself naked are also an account of our present time.

Relating them to his studies on Duchamp means not only reading their iconography but also connecting them to a practice of art that involves the body, behaviors, and therefore life, following a logic that Bonito Oliva sees as at the basis of Duchamp’s thought and by which he himself is inspired. Here, then, for all that we try to separate them, the exhibitions, the writings, and the public performances every time become one with their author. So, welcome everybody to *A.B.O. THEATRON. Art or Life*.

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<sup>1</sup> The neologism “Trans-avanguardia,” with a hyphen, was first published by Bonito Oliva in his article “La Trans-avanguardia italiana,” in *Flash Art*, no. 92–93, Milan, October–November 1979, pp. 17–20, [https:// flash---art.it/article/la-trans-avanguardia/](https://flash---art.it/article/la-trans-avanguardia/).

<sup>2</sup> M. Duchamp, *Scritti*, ed. M. Sanouillet (Milan: Abscondita, 2005) and B. Marcadé, *Marcel Duchamp. La vita a credito* (Monza: Johan & Levi, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> *Amore mio*, exhibition catalog, Palazzo Ricci, Montepulciano, June 30 – September 30, 1970 (Florence: Centro Di, 1970), n. p. See also *Vettor Pisani Eroica / Antierioica*, eds. L. Cherubini, A. Vilianni, and E. Viola, exhibition catalog, Madre – Museo d’arte contemporanea Donnaregina, Naples, December 21, 2013 –March 24, 2014; Teatro Margherita, Bari, January 27 – March 30, 2014 (Naples: Electa, 2016), p. 87.

<sup>4</sup> U. Mulas, *New York: Arte e Persone* (Milan: Longanesi & C., 1967). On the subject of the portraits of Duchamp, Mulas wrote: “There are also some pictures made in Duchamp’s house, those portraits I’ve mentioned before and in these pictures I tried to lead him acting in that doing-nothing-attitude, showing that silence which weighed so heavily upon young artists’ work in that period; a silence which is weighing even more upon these artists’ behavior.” See U. Mulas, *La Fotografia* (Turin: Giulio Einaudi Editore, 1973).

<sup>5</sup> Bonito Oliva and Mulas had already crossed paths in 1968, on the occasion of the author’s poetry book *Fiction Poems*, and again in 1970 with *Amore mio* and *Vitalità del negativo*, when Mulas captured the pulsating energy of the exhibitions in photos that have helped to shape their memory.