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A conversation

Achille Bonito Oliva

Hans Ulrich Obrist

This interview took place on two different occasions in two different places, first in Venice during the inauguration of the 2017 Biennale and then while Bonito Oliva was in Alba on September 21 and 22, 2019 on the occasion of *For an Imaginist Renewal of the World. The Alba Congress: 1956–2019*, a poetic commemoration of the first World Congress of Free Artists (*Congresso mondiale degli artisti liberi*, Alba, September 2–8, 1956). The transcript was subsequently revised by both parties and edited by Andrea Viliani assisted by Anna Musini. With thanks also to Adele Koechlin, Max Shackleton and Lorraine Two.

Hans Ulrich Obrist: I'd like to begin our conversation with the history of your work as a curator. Who were your inspirations, did you draw from the previous generation? For example, Giorgio Griffa once told me that Toti Scialoja was his inspiration, that nothing of his life or work is comprehensible without him. Do any such catalysts, professors or sources of inspiration exist for you?

Achille Bonito Oliva: I should state first of all that when I began my career in the late 1960s, it was with a switch from poetry to prose. Having started out as a poet, published two books, and joined Gruppo 63, I embraced art almost immediately because I felt that it provided me with stimuli that the world of poetry did not. And what did I find in art? A professorial, academic world made up of great scholars. Think of the art historian Giulio Carlo Argan, who asked me, among other things, to write the last chapter of his history of art: the fourth volume that goes from the eighteenth century to the 1960s, written by him, and the art of the 1960s to the present, written by me. Argan tended to see the concept in art rather than the object. He didn't fetishize the artwork. With his ideologically oriented background, he accorded priority to the need and function of art. As a result, his pupils—the "Argonauts," as I call them—were more inclined toward conceptual correctness. And when I started, I created a problem, so to speak, by talking about *exhibitional writing*. I maintained—and put into practice—the idea that a critic uses words to write books and essays, and artworks to write in the social space, developing an idea, locating the works, assisting the public in the sphere of exhibitions and criticism. And so, I felt this diversity, the need to give a leading role, a face, to the critic, who had previously been a marginal figure, like a dresser or a prompter in the theater, unseen but heard by the actors. Before I began, another poet, namely Emilio Villa, had been the first to write about Alberto Burri, Lucio Fontana, and a whole series of artists.

HUO: Was he a member of Gruppo 63 like you?

ABO: No, he was earlier, an isolated poet.

HUO: Do you regard him as a mentor?

ABO: Yes, a mentor.

HUO: And so, you started out as a poet before entering the dimension of art. Can you tell us something more about this transition from literature to work as a theoretician and curator?

ABO: As I was saying, I switched from poetry to prose. I started out as an experimental, avant-garde

poet, first with words alone and then with a visual poetry, a combination of words and images. And so, from the very outset, I had not just the suspicion but concrete proof that words not only produce a reference to something else but also glow with their own inner light and generate an epiphany, very similar to a mental image. I published two books of poems. The first, entitled *Made in Mater* and published by Sampietro in Bologna in 1967, consisted of poems read at the Gruppo 63 conference in Fano. The second, *Fiction Poems*, 1968, was published by Lucio Amelio for the Modern Art Agency in Naples. And then there were the maps, a series of visual poems, a sort of atlas on the relationship between word and image.

HUO: I don't know these books of yours. Have they ever come out again?

ABO: I decided against it. *Fiction Poems*, the book published by Amelio, contains a photograph of me taken by Ugo Mulas with "movements" by Gianni Colombo.

HUO: On the cover?

ABO: No, inside. Mulas photographed me from the front, the left and the back, so that the image comes together and falls apart like a sort of game.

HUO: Not so much a book as an object.

ABO: A small object. Those first two books gave rise to a kind of vigilance in me, the awareness that words aren't erased but remain indelible and motionless in the space-time of a page or on any other surface, and when words become visual poetry, they create a fusion of word and image. This interest in poetry and the image derived from words also triggered my interest in and embrace of the visual arts. On encountering something that struck me in the works of artists, I was somehow absorbed. It was a period that saw an attempt in Italy—as in other parts of Europe and in America—to go beyond the boundaries of expressive language and explore its potential. This happened not only in poetry and literature—as demonstrated by Gruppo 63—but also in the visual sphere. Think in this connection of artists like Mario Schifano, Giovanni Anselmo, Alighiero Boetti, Mario and Marisa Merz, Michelangelo Pistoletto, and Gilberto Zorio starting out in Turin, and Pino Pascali in Rome. I was surrounded, stimulated, and drawn by the surprising work of all these young artists, whom I met at shows and in galleries. I'd moved from Naples to Rome and mixed with them by day and by night, and so there was a continuity in existential terms between them and me. By day at shows and in galleries, by night in bars and discos—because I loved dancing and still do.

HUO: Is there any moment at which, looking back, you can see this change taking place?

ABO: I'm thinking, so as to be precise, about what I'd identify as my first love or first encounter. We can say that the first was obviously in Naples, because it was there that I studied at university and other institutions from 1966 to 1968. The first encounter was therefore with Neapolitan artists. One who struck me at the time, with his patient, silent approach and total absorption in his work, was Renato Barisani, a Neapolitan but almost north European in his rigor. This made me realize that art holds many surprises above and beyond the biographical details or the characteristics of the artists who create it, and therefore it can't be confined to any territorial or environmental specificity but is completely undetermined, as I put it, in the best sense. I realized that art creates surprises not only for those who encounter it but also for those who create it. The strength of art lies in the involvement of the observer and the creator alike.

HUO: Did you also take part in any of the events organized by Gruppo 63, unquestionably one of the major avant-garde literary movement of the 1960s?

ABO: I used to frequent the Libreria Guida at Port'Alba in Naples, a legendary, historic bookshop that organized meetings with the authors of works of international importance. There I met Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, art historians like Argan and Cesare Brandi, and much-discussed philosophers like Armando Plebe and Umberto Eco. It was there that a meeting was held with Gruppo 63, with Edoardo Sanguineti and Nanni Balestrini. While the Neapolitan sphere was one in which

only echoes of the so-called new avant-garde arrived, these first-hand, personal encounters produced stimulating and even thrilling effects. I used to speak at these public meetings—speeches that could last as long as twenty minutes, completely incomprehensible. I was so impregnated with reading that I really needed to *expectorate*, to get it off my chest, to turn what I'd absorbed into words. So it was that the first invitations and contacts came about through those meetings. We set up an avant-garde group called Operativo 64 in Naples, together with other young people and myself as theoretician, more or less, at a time when the new avant-garde tradition of the 1950s found progressive realization in the 1960s. It was in this context that invitations arrived from Gruppo 63, through Sanguineti and Balestrini, and I made my public debut as a poet in Fano, reading to a sometimes merciless audience of other poets, whose right it was to comment and to applaud or slate. If they applauded, it was like winning promotion on the battlefield. And then came visual poetry too, and shows with various groups, Gruppo 70, Lamberto Pignotti, Eugenio Miccini, Giuseppe Chiari, Ketty La Rocca, visual poets mainly active in Florence. We can say that I'd already gone beyond the geographical boundaries of Rome, where I moved in 1968. In Rome there was a development of my first meetings with artists in Naples, above all Pascali and Schifano. I'd already organized a few shows with them at the Libreria Guida and Lucio Amelio's gallery, including my own first event, a small two-man show of Renato Mambor and Pino Pascali in 1966. I then curated solo retrospectives of both artists in Naples at Castel Sant'Elmo in 2004 and 2009. This personal contact continued with Pascali and developed into a relationship at both the cultural and the human level that lasted until his short life came to an end when he crashed his motorcycle in 1968. It was the same with my great friend Schifano, who died in 1998. I arrived in Rome in 1968 to find a climate of euphoria with the Roman School, Plinio De Martiis and Fabio Sargentini, and galleries like La Tartaruga and L'Attico. I also developed a whole series of international contacts going beyond painting and sculpture into the realms of dance, music, theater. It was in this context, having curated *Amore mio* and *Vitalità del negativo* in 1970, that I published my first book in 1971, *Il territorio magico*, a study of the art of behavior in all its different aspects in an international perspective.

HUO: What was your first major exhibition?

ABO: *Amore mio* in 1970. It was a show with a title like something from the Sanremo Song Festival in a period that was dominated by politics with the individual identity giving way to the identity of protests and demonstrations. In this exhibition, the artists were instead free to show their loves, their influences in art.

HUO: *Amore mio* is described by Romy Golan as “creatively improvised in the Renaissance edifice of Palazzo Ricci in Montepulciano.” Can you tell me about the show and how you came to curate it?

ABO: The show was born out of meetings with a number of artists: Enrico Castellani, Gino Marotta, Fabio Mauri, and Paolo Scheggi, some from Rome and some from Milan. They had an agreement to hold an exhibition at Palazzo Ricci, a late-Renaissance building by Baldassarre Peruzzi, in Montepulciano. It was the artists who asked me to join them on an equal footing as supervisor and general secretary. Moreover, being self-convened, they were—like me—asserting the idiosyncratic role of the critical act. And it was in dialog with them that the misgivings we all felt about the domination of culture by politics after 1969 emerged, as well as the need to assert the obligation of art to focus on itself. What the artists wanted was not so much to impose as to confirm the autonomy of art with respect to this situation, the view that art shouldn't be subject to any assent or consensus. Hence also the idea of the title *Amore mio*. The artists also invited other artists and all of them were free to indicate their cultural, affective, emotive preferences. The scenario presented was therefore not hysterical, but relaxed and inspired. It asserted the identity of the artist as creator with no agenda. The show had the deliberate characteristic of rapidity in the sense that there's no set time for creation. It can take a long time for something that requires distance to ripen, but it's more rapid for what has

to be done immediately, for the urgent need, as in this case, to assert the inherent, intrinsic values of art.

HUO: Then came *Vitalità del negativo nell'arte italiana 1960/70* in the same year. How was this exhibition born?

ABO: Having read many of Nietzsche's ideas and assertions as part of my literary background, I took them as my starting point. I was accused of poisoning young people's minds by quoting Nietzsche, who was still out of fashion. It was, however, precisely the exhibitional writing at the Palazzo delle Esposizioni in Rome that caused the public to experience a great aesthetic shock and made the show a success. The artists involved were Giovanni Anselmo, Jannis Kounellis, Mario Merz, Giulio Paolini, Michelangelo Pistoletto, Pino Pascali, Gino De Dominicis, Fabio Mauri, Vettor Pisani, Vincenzo Agnetti, Enrico Castellani, Gianni Colombo and Ugo Mulas, all very young.

HUO: The presence of Arte Povera in *Vitalità del negativo* is described as minimal. In this connection, the art historian Romy Golan speaks of your preference for "an art of representation rather than presentation" and for artists with "an allegorical impulse." Can you tell us something more about this "allegorical impulse" and how it manifests itself in your work as a curator?

ABO: *Vitalità del negativo* was held in 1970, when Arte Povera was beginning to make itself known as a movement that accorded priority to natural materials and processes in opposition to the opulence of the industrial civilization, against artificiality in its thinking and action. As originally conceived, Arte Povera was therefore a deliberately anti-formal movement seeking to highlight the intrinsic fertility of things and to end the domination of form, which was understood as a kind of proposal and beautification with a view to subsequent commercialization and therefore rejected. The very name Arte Povera—the noun *art* qualified by the adjective *poor* or *humble*—indicates a deliberate impoverishment on the part of the artist aimed at avoiding representation and imposing the presentation of materials, processes, bodies, ideas, and actions. Intuitively, perhaps because of my literary background, I was more inclined toward artists of an allegorical nature and works characterized by complexity rather than a value, so to speak, of pure presentation. This preference or attitude already emerges in *Vitalità del negativo* and finds confirmation in subsequent exhibitions up to and beyond the birth of the Transavantgarde movement. This approach seeks to assert subjectivity and the identity of the artist, to go beyond the neutrality of form, as well as the dogma of the primacy of politics over the unpredictable language of art, and hence also to go beyond the application of any adjective. *Art* is a noun that requires no accompanying qualification, description or justification. It was in Transavantgarde that this attitude of mine was thus to find formalization in linguistic and iconographic terms. However paradoxical it might appear, I detected the same aspect in Arte Povera, in some of its artists and some of its works, like those included in *Vitalità del negativo*.

HUO: Tell me a bit more about this preference of yours for representation rather than presentation.

ABO: It's born out of the fact that representation is the result of a process in which the artist becomes a creator and not just an indicator and transporter of materials from one place to another. Not just someone who identifies something and moves it like a ready-made into another space. For me, the process of elaboration also justifies the morality of the very presence of the artist as a privileged figure. I then curated *Contemporanea* in 1973 in the parking lot of Villa Borghese.

HUO: I wanted to ask you about this exhibition, because it's mentioned by artists in so many interviews. What was the reason or intention—or indeed the epiphany—behind organizing a show in a car park?

ABO: We needed a lot of space! The museums in Rome didn't hold large-scale exhibitions. I'd already published *Il territorio magico*, my first book, written in 1969.

HUO: The one you say you wrote in five days and five nights?

ABO: My first theoretical work, *Il territorio magico*, written in four days and four nights, cited by

Cecilia Alemani in her Italian Pavilion at the Biennale in Venice. I must give you a copy. *Contemporanea* implemented and expanded this interdisciplinary approach: art, cinema, theater, music, dance, photography, architecture, and artist books. A multilingual exhibition with a range of disciplines organized and presented in the anomalous space of the Villa Borghese parking lot, designed by Luigi Walter Moretti, and featuring artists, choreographers, musicians like Trisha Brown, Philip Glass, and Yvonne Rainer, as well as visual art. There were nine sections and I kept the art section for myself. It took a particular approach in chronological terms, moving backwards from 1973 rather than from the 1950s to 1973.

HUO: A reversed chronology.

ABO: Yes, because I wanted visitors to start from their own present-day reality and move through the space like a temporal dimension. This reversal caused them great surprise. *Contemporanea* had a major international impact. No one had ever organized an exhibition with so many sections. It ended with Christo, who came and wrapped up the Porta Pinciana. Do you know Porta Pinciana?

HUO: Of course. I've seen the photos even though I didn't see the exhibition.

ABO: It was, I believe, the first time that use was made of atypical spaces like these ancient walls and city gates, or indeed the parking lot.

HUO: It's much more frequent nowadays, but it was certainly not so at the time. It also pre-dated shows like those of Jan Hoet in apartments, starting with *Chambres d'Amis*.

ABO: Jan Hoet has always acknowledged this. It's as though we were working on a line that could start with the Vienna Secession and end with *Contemporanea* and *Chambres d'Amis*. The same views were expressed by Harald Szeemann and Jean-Christophe Ammann, who gave me a lot of support in our joint work of the period. Yes, there was a clash between me and Germano Celant, but only at the theoretical level, as we perhaps shared the same speed, intensity and commitment. Unlike me, Celant always adopted the ideological stance to which European art was subjugated in the 1960s and 1970s, whereas America broke free of it with Pop Art.

HUO: How did *Contemporanea* begin? What was the first work of 1973?

ABO: There was Vito Acconci and works by Pisani and De Dominicis. I recall Urs Lüthi, Luciano Fabro's *Lo spirato* (1968–73), then the canonical names of Andy Warhol, Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, and Cy Twombly. I appointed curators for the sections connecting with the performing arts: the avant-garde critic Giuseppe Bartolucci for theater, Paolo Bertetto for cinema, and Fabio Sargentini for music and dance. I also appointed Alessandro Mendini for architecture and design, Daniela Palazzoli for photography, Yvon Lambert and Michel Claura for artist books and records, and Mario Diacono for visual and concrete poetry. The catalog was published by Centro Di in Florence, who published all of my early catalogs.

HUO: What are the works of this exhibition that stand out most in your memory?

ABO: I finally featured Fluxus in an international event when the movement was, as you know, considered borderline, an anti-power group operating on the outer edges of the art system. I got Wolf Vostell to create an extraordinary happening with loaves and cars. Then came Nam June Paik and Yoko Ono. I naturally invited Ben Vautier and Joseph Beuys, whose first Italian show I curated in 1971 thanks to Lucio Amelio. He put on an extraordinary performance. Beuys presented the entire *Arena* series, but spent the whole evening of the inauguration in a great big cloak sweeping up with a broom. Marina Abramović presented *Rhythm 10*, her performance with knives, for a week in the *Open-Air* section.

HUO: A legendary performance.

ABO: Legendary and shocking. She really cut herself with those knives. And then there was Luigi Ontani dressed up as Tarzan ... The exhibition involved a lot of young students as well as critics and art dealers from all over the world, like Ileana Sonnabend and Leo Castelli. It featured 90 artists, 45

European and 45 American. As I said, Brown, Glass, and Rainer were present, as well as Steve Reich, Wilson and so many others.

HUO: So it was a bit like a Venice Biennale combining art, architecture, cinema, theater, music, and dance, which has always been the utopian dream.

ABO: When I directed the Biennale in 1993, I also invited Amos Gitai to put on a show, and I invited filmmakers like Pedro Almodóvar, Peter Greenaway, Emir Kusturica, Wim Wenders, and again Robert Wilson to present works and installations.

HUO: As I remember, Ernst Jünger was there too. Why did you invite Jünger?

ABO: A great poet. That was an act of extreme narcissism on my part. And there was a great outcry because I asked Massimo Cacciari, the mayor of Venice, to write the *laudatio* for Jünger. Rifondazione Comunista, one of the parties on the municipal council, attacked Cacciari for allowing me to give the prize to a Nazi. I've always acted with great freedom and the 1993 Biennale marks the climax.

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ABO: Jan Hoet has always acknowledged this. It's as though we were working on a line that could start with the Vienna Secession and end with *Contemporanea* and *Chambres d'Amis*. The same views were of a critical and cultural strategy, a transnational, interdisciplinary, multimedia project. I refused to allow Serbia a pavilion because of the genocidal acts committed during the civil war in Yugoslavia, and I presented Chinese artists for the first time ever, even though I had no power and wasn't supposed to have anything to do with the national pavilions. It was through dialog that I got some members of the committee to agree that I could also invite artists from other countries, like Joseph Kosuth in the Hungarian Pavilion or Nam June Paik and Hans Haacke in the German Pavilion, which was awarded the Golden Lion.

HUO: Rem Koolhaas, when invited to curate the Architecture Biennale, persuaded most of the national pavilions at the architectural biennial to address his chosen theme. It depends on whether the director can convince them, doesn't it?

ABO: The attitude adopted in this case is very interesting. I always say that artists are my closest enemies because I have a healthy adversarial relationship with them in which the artist creates and the critic considers. And I've always had relations of this intensity, so to speak, also with the artists of the Transavantgarde group, not only with those I included but also with those I excluded. It's a position, and also a feeling for the game, that I also have in life and that gave the artist the certainty of my attention—I was not a guardian angel but an exterminating angel in the best sense of the expression. I created Transavantgarde, as you know, with five of these artists.

HUO: When you coined the term *Transavanguardia* for the Italian version of Neo-Expressionism, why did you think the Italian art scene needed this precise terminology?

ABO: It all stems from my study of Mannerism. Contemporary art, including the art of the new avant-garde movements, was the product of ideologies due to what I call "linguistic Darwinism," an evolutionary idea of art and the progress of its form that ensures the contemporary value of the work. It's an Oedipus complex in which the son slays the father and imposes his own presence with his own forms. This derives from an attitude typical of Western civilization, namely transition from the natural condition to history, the idea of progress and evolution. This principle of experimentation led in the Renaissance to spatial breakthrough, the step beyond two-dimensionality, the construction of perspective based on the principles of harmony, proportion, and symmetry commenced by Giotto and completed by Piero della Francesca. And depth is the moment of man's greatest adjustment in space,

both social and historical, the moment of our greatest domination. And what happened then? At the end of the fifteenth century, all the fields of knowledge were plunged into an epistemological crisis by objective facts and events: the discovery of America, the Sack of Rome in 1527, the birth of modern finance, Luther's attack on the Catholic Church, Kepler's discovery that it isn't the Sun that revolves around the Earth but the Earth that revolves around the Sun, and therefore that the Earth is a satellite planet.

And if the Earth is no longer the center of the universe, the anthropocentric principle also loses all credibility. This humbles the pride of mankind and, in the specific case of art, calls into question the principle of experimentation. It's as though artists no longer had the strength to experiment and acknowledged, so to speak, that they could proceed but only toward the past, in memory, no longer having any belief in their present and their ability to represent it in their own image and likeness. The principle of invention thus gave way to the principle of citation, and artists produced Mannerism, which constitutes a peak of art and of conceptual introspection on the artist's part. Artists who remembered and still cited perspective made it multiple, altered it to the point of anamorphosis. At the same time, this identification with the past actually means engineering it, creating it by design, and thereby avowing a detachment of art from reality. Everything was weakened and artists realized that they could no longer live reality but only remember it. And so, they began to paint and sculpt *in the manner of* Michelangelo, Leonardo, and Raphael. Hence the term *Mannerism*. Domenico Beccafumi, Pontorno, Bronzino, Parmigianino—great artists—developed a mental value of color at the chromatic level, as though color itself were a memory. What happened next? In the 1970s, with the crisis affecting all forms of ideology, the very idea of the avant-garde was weakened. What is avant-garde rests on productive optimism, but if this hope for the future no longer exists, in this case too, art returns to citation, works on its own nomadism, eclecticism, contamination: *trans* expresses this idea of crossing, also through the memory of the styles that artists produce. I theorized this in terms of an international movement beginning in Italy but also involving artists from other generations and places, like Georg Baselitz, Markus Lupertz, and Anselm Kiefer in Germany and Julian Schnabel in America. Transavantgarde is therefore precisely this: an art of crossing, of plunging into the boundary between present and past, of contamination between abstract and figurative. There's no longer any separation, any battle between languages that seemed to be poles apart. With the Transavantgarde, there's coexistence and therefore the Oedipus complex gives way to art's ability to embrace all of its possible languages.

HUO: This was in the late 1970s?

ABO: It was in the mid-1970s that I wrote *L'ideologia del traditore. Arte, maniera, manierismo*, a book in which I identify Mannerism as the matrix of contemporary art because Mannerism, as I was saying, is also the result of exhaustion, of an epistemological crisis that gives rise to a high degree of conceptuality marking the transition from invention to citation. Artists who had worked for centuries on the principle of invention, out of which the very history of art is born, with its linguistic progression, came to take refuge in the principle of citation and hence of memory. It was in that period, in 1976, that I organized an exhibition on the return to drawing entitled *Drawing/Transparence. Disegno/Trasparenza*. The affirmation of painting was still to come in actual fact, but one already sensed the return to a form of manual craftsmanship in which drawing wasn't merely preparation for something else.

HUO: Who were the artists involved in this exhibition?

ABO: 57 American artists were juxtaposed with 57 Italians to trace the relations between conceptual artists and their expression in the form of drawing. They included Vito Acconci, Joseph Kosuth, Jasper Johns, Lawrence Weiner, Gordon Matta-Clark, Bruce Nauman, Vincenzo Agnetti, Sandro Chia, Francesco Clemente, Fabio Mauri, Gino De Dominicis, and Vettor Pisani. It was in 1979 that I

curated the first Transavantgarde exhibition, *Opere fatte ad arte*, with work by Sandro Chia, Francesco Clemente, Enzo Cucchi, Mimmo Paladino, and Nicola De Maria at Acireale in Sicily. Szeemann came to see it too.

HUO: Szeemann went everywhere. He was also at one of my first bigger exhibitions, *Cities on the Move*, which I curated with Hou Hanru, and the Viennese inaugurations. It was incredible—Szeemann was always present.

ABO: Szeemann was in fact a visionary, not a bureaucrat. After *Le stanze*, the show I curated at the Colonna castle in Genazzano, we worked together on plans for *Aperto '80* at the Biennale in Venice, including the Transavantgarde artists. This event was repeated in the subsequent editions until its cancellation by Jean Clair in 1995. *Aperto '80* was the first international exhibition of Transavantgarde. And the American Marxist philosopher Fredric Jameson—do you know him?

HUO: Yes.

ABO: He wrote a book on postmodernism (*Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1991). And in the opening pages he wrote that on comparing the theories of Jean-François Lyotard on postmodernism and those of Bonito Oliva on the Transavantgarde, he preferred mine. Perhaps because Lyotard, in his black and white narrative, was against modernity, whereas Transavantgarde, with the idea of transit and crossing, was nomadic, open, contaminating, capable of interweaving the history of art, including the art of the avant-gardes, while asserting at the same time the identity or *genius loci* of the artist, and therefore a return to artistic subjectivity.

HUO: Was this Erwin Panofsky's idea of the future being invented out of fragments of the past?

ABO: Definitely. It's something I'd also borne in mind while writing *L'ideologia del traditore* a few years earlier. This past is, however, not archaeological or nostalgic, but a past handled with a principle of irony. Because, as Goethe said, irony is a passion released through detachment and therefore has a lightness like the playfulness of the *commedia dell'arte*. Postmodernism marks the move beyond sodality, collectivity, the move beyond the first-person plural of movements. As you pointed out, there have in fact been no movements since Transavantgarde. There has been a return to individualism. On examining movements in art, I see a procession in single file, as in Westerns, where everyone walks alone. I also see, however, that artists, with the crisis of ideologies, have by no means fortuitously also adopted a political component in their work and their practice. In this sense, art has a function, the function of indicating the sense of responsibility assumed by the artist as proposal.

HUO: Édouard Glissant's concept of "mondiality" consists in the possibility of developing a global unity that does not eliminate but rather integrates differences. Globalization, as it's now being produced, leads to the extinction and disappearance of languages. Glissant says that we must find a third path, in a certain sense, a global dialog that preserves the possibility of solidarity. I regard him as the crucial author for our era because he also talks about the *archipelago*, a key concept that I'd like to discuss with you. I'm thinking about the national pavilions at the 1993 Biennale, the one for which you acted as artistic director, and the fact that Nam June Paik and Hans Haacke showed works together in the German Pavilion. I also remember the Austrian Pavilion curated by Peter Weibel with Gerwald Rockenschaub, Andrea Fraser, and Christian Philipp Müller—an Austrian, a Swiss, and an American artist. This model was taken up again in 2013 with an exchange between Germany and France, with Anri Sala in the German Pavilion representing France, and on other occasions, including the edition of 2017, with the Polish Pavilion entrusted to the American artist Sharon Lockhart. And also the idea of going beyond the Biennale gardens. I taught for a few years at the Istituto Universitario di Architettura in Venice and had a brilliant student there called Alessandro Petti, whose thesis imagined the gardens as though every country in the world had a pavilion there.

If that were really the case, they'd have one of the world's highest levels of urban density. They'd be

like Hong Kong. It's obviously normal that given the set limit for the number located in the gardens, the national pavilions have begun to spread out more and more through the city to form an archipelago.

ABO: The exodus from the gardens that you're talking about began in the history of the Biennale with *Aperto '80*, that exhibition I curated together with Szeemann in the Magazzini del Sale near the Punta della Dogana. We invited 45 artists to take part. It was the first-ever presentation of all the Transavantgarde group, but also of new painting from Germany, for example. It was the first fully conscious and systematic episode of departure from the gardens, which had previously and rightly enjoyed legendary status because they reproduced the model of the World Fairs and the Viennese Secession, the first exhibition of an avant-garde movement. Riccardo Selvatico, whose signature on April 19, 1893 gave birth to the Biennale as a two-yearly national art exhibition, had the idea of national pavilions but wanted them to address the present, just as the Viennese Secession of 1899 presented the new art of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

HUO: How was the idea of *Aperto '80* born? This is why I see the notion of the archipelago as so fundamental. If there's a major event, like dOCUMENTA or the Biennale, located in a particular place, it has a continental logic, but as soon as it starts to expand through the city, it becomes an archipelago. As Glissant says, the continent has a more homogenizing logic, whereas the archipelago is welcoming, sheltering. This is why I wondered how you and Szeemann came to think of this initial opening up in 1980.

ABO: The fact is that everything had previously taken place in the national pavilions. We instead had the idea of *Aperto '80* as an international exhibition with artists from different countries. This is how *Aperto '80* was born, out of the desire to constitute an international exhibition located outside the nations and their pavilions. There had already been a central exhibition with an international structure in 1978, the first year that I was invited to be part of the Biennale's group of curators, and it was called *Sei stazioni per Artenatura. La natura dell'arte*. It was held in the Italian Pavilion and therefore in the Biennale gardens. In 1980 we felt the need for a different and distant space, and decided to use the old salt warehouses, a site of industrial archaeology, for an exhibition with components of a multimedia, interdisciplinary, and transnational character. It was a neo-humanistic project because it developed reflections on the contemporary condition of the individual and asserted that art is a question about the world, not an answer. Art can't solve anything but it can reinvent the world by representing it. And at the edition of the Biennale that I directed in 1993, I decided to confirm those elements of multimediality and interdisciplinarity by also inviting, as I was telling you, a number of filmmakers. Robert Wilson, who presented a multimedia installation, was awarded the prize for sculpture. I could use the prefix *trans* in this case with reference, however, not to the Transavantgarde but rather to the idea of transit, movement, crossing boundaries, contamination, and opening. *Aperto '93* was supervised by Helena Kontova, with thirteen different sections, each entrusted to an emerging curator. It was the first Biennale with the participation, in this context, of artists like Matthew Barney, Damien Hirst, who presented one of his first animals in formaldehyde, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Carsten Höller, Philippe Parreno, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Félix González-Torres, Gabriel Orozco, Pipilotti Rist, Andrea Zittel, and Maurizio Cattelan, who subcontracted his participation by presenting a huge poster advertising a perfume. It was all managed by Armando Testa's advertising agency. I really like the title of that operation, which is once again *trans* in its own way: *Lavorare è un brutto mestiere* ["Work's a terrible job"].

HUO: Which of the five Transavantgarde artists did you meet first?

ABO: Sandro Chia. And then Francesco Clemente.

HUO: Did it all begin with Chia?

ABO: Yes, because he lived in Rome. So did Clemente. And then there was Enzo Cucchi, who moved

to Rome from the Marche region. Mimmo Paladino was then living in Milan and Nicola De Maria in Turin.

HUO: Clemente was very close to Alighiero Boetti, wasn't he?

ABO: Boetti is one of the artists with whom my relations have had great continuity, like De Dominicis, Pisani, Pistoletto, and Schifano. There was a real relationship of exchange with Alighiero, as we both had a sense of irony, a kind of playfulness that I also brought to my work as a critic, making it as unacademic as possible, and that Boetti transferred into visual forms. What characterized our relationship was disenchantment but practiced as a form of participation. I curated a major exhibition of his work at the Madre museum in Naples in 2009, which also highlighted his independence in an intensely dogmatic period like the uprising of 1968, something also celebrated by Arte Povera. He had the passion that is released in detachment—Goethe's definition referred to earlier—and succeeded in producing his forms without being overwhelmed by the state of ideological guerrilla warfare, which extended from politics to art. As you recalled in mentioning the friendship between Boetti and Clemente, we must also remember the relations between the Transavantgarde and Arte Povera artists. I still have close relations with the artists of Arte Povera, with whom I've been involved in exhibitions and books. What was the problem? That Arte Povera was a movement born in a large industrial city like Turin and championing a return to natural materials and processes as against artificial urban production. They were all northern artists. It's perhaps no coincidence that Transavantgarde was instead born in the Neapolitan sphere. I'm Neapolitan, Paladino's Neapolitan, De Maria's Neapolitan, Clemente's Neapolitan.

HUO: A southern movement.

ABO: There was only Cucchi from the Marche region, and Chia, who lived in Rome but is from Tuscany. You can therefore understand that through manual craftsmanship, memory, and citation, Transavantgarde reintroduced a form of creativity with a Mediterranean origin and matrix, that it perhaps needed the sensibility of which I spoke earlier, the *genius loci*, in order to set off and discover the world. It's no coincidence that, like Mannerism, the Transavantgarde also spread through Europe. As you know, the Renaissance lasted only thirty years and was Italian, whereas Mannerism spread all the way through Europe, because the epistemological crisis generating it involved the whole of Europe. Nor is it by chance that this happened all over again with *Aperto '80*. There was of course already German art. There was Georg Baselitz, there was Jörg Immendorff, there was Anselm Kiefer, there was A.R. Penck, and there was Sigmar Polke, the disobedient pupil of Joseph Beuys and an exemplary artist. Some of them were from the generation before Transavantgarde and constitute its evocation rather than its premise. It was the German artists who returned to Expressionism as their "mother tongue." And this enabled them to assert an identity. That's why I wrote the book on the Italian Transavanguardia first and then one on the international Transavantgarde immediately afterward, to state that these German artists were rooted in Expressionism even more explicitly than the Italians. And then this phenomenon also spread to the United States. At the same time, as you're well aware, the Americans have this puritan side. If they don't have something, they import it. And Transavantgarde therefore enjoyed great success in North America. Arte Povera arrived there first but didn't obtain such significant recognition. It was regarded platonically because there were equally radical American artists of the same generation. Transavantgarde instead became a mass phenomenon and a media success, also as far as I was personally concerned, with appearances on TV. The papers began to write about this great international success of Italian art and dealers like Bruno Bischofberger, Paul Maenz, and Gian Enzo Sperone began to support it. In short, it's well known that the art system and all of its component parts supported the movement and its artists in that period intentionally and structurally.

HUO: The historical and neo-historical avant-garde movements have manifestos, very often written

by the artists involved. What was the manifesto in this case?

ABO: My manifesto appeared in 1979, one year before *Aperto '80* and one year before the book *Transavanguardia italiana*.

HUO: Before the book?

ABO: Yes. It appeared as an article in *Flash Art*.

HUO: It was first published in *Flash Art*?

ABO: Celant's article on Arte Povera also appeared in *Flash Art*, just under ten years earlier.

HUO: So, everything began with *Flash Art*.

ABO: The magazine had a particular strategic function at the time. And so, I published my article, "La Transavanguardia," there and then curated these shows. At the same time, the very term *Transavanguardia* was a success because it requires no translation. *Transavanguardia* is simple and contains the idea of transit. As I was saying, the philosopher Fredric Jameson maintains that Jean-François Lyotard's theory is one that causes a blockage, being only an opposition, whereas Transavantgarde, in its theorization, goes beyond painting or sculpture and describes the stance of cultural nomadism and stylistic eclecticism. We were surprised because Jameson accepted all this even though he's a Marxist. And in his book—have you read it? ...

HUO: Yes, I have.

ABO: Of course, you read everything ... Well, it's there. Then of course there were other exhibitions, like *Avanguardia Transavanguardia* in Rome at the Mura Aureliane in 1982.

HUO: "I have always thought that critics should practice not only essayistic writing but also a kind of 'exhibitional writing,' a way of unfolding critical thought through an exhibition in a relationship of scale with the architectural setting and the social body." Can you explain this concept, which you've put forward on numerous occasions, of "exhibitional writing" as an extension of critical thought?

ABO: The art critic has various levels of activity. In my case, the first involves writing essays and theoretical works. But there's also another kind of writing, one developed through exhibitions. Exhibitions became a crucial and all-pervading medium in the 1970s, almost looking forward to the social networks, through which art presents itself in terms of visible form. Critics employ words in the catalog and works in the exhibition space to address the questions they wish to represent. It's no coincidence that my exhibitions are nearly all thematic. Exhibitional writing generates a constant relationship with the viewer. Moreover, it generates a relationship in which the viewer is stimulated by the company of theoretical thought, like a sort of audio guide. Exhibitional writing therefore requires a range of different architectural settings. On the other hand, I'm more inclined to develop a critique understood as interpretation. And this is also why I find a difference between my generation and the next, in which curators perform a kind of "maintenance" of art. There are, of course, some very good curators, but generally speaking the curator's work is one of assistance, aestheticism—in other words, maintenance. I instead believe that the critic attains completion through critical writing and through exhibitional writing. I realize that there has been a shift, in quantitative terms, from the figure of the critic to that of the curator, not least because there are now far more museums and many foundations, all of them very proud. There are even a lot of schools for curators. It's from the rib of critics like me that they created the curator, who often has little memory. You yourself have played a central role in the distinction I've just mentioned between critic and curator. You're someone who's invested a great deal in art and therefore go looking for art. Moreover, you go looking for a truth in art, seeking to confirm what has really happened, not operating in the realm of fantasy. It's also clear from the interviews you carry out, like this one, that you are, so to speak, an insomniac. Do you have trouble sleeping?

HUO: I have insomnia but when I worked with H el ene Cixous she gave me a book of dreams and

told me I should sleep in order to dream.

I followed her advice. I have another question for you: how do you think the architectural setting, the work, and the social body can be brought together in staging an exhibition? In an interview I once read, you talked about the difficulties that arise in using historical architecture to house contemporary work. I'd like to know something more about the importance of architecture for you in organizing an exhibition.

ABO: I realized in the late 1960s that there were no roles in Italy, no contemporary spaces and times for young critics like me, and I created a dialectical relationship between contemporary art and great architectural works of the past or less obvious ones of the present. This also gave rise to a sort of eroticism, a direct link between the space (extraneous to art) and the time occupied by the work. My exhibitional writing thus developed in this way on the need of art to appear, to position itself, and to speak. I addressed this problem straight away through exhibitions like *Amore mio*, *Vitalità del negativo*, and *Contemporanea*. In *Contemporanea*, for example, all the different languages—art, cinema, theater, music, photography, architecture—entered into dialog. The exhibition had the subtitle *1973–1955*, from the present to the past. As I was telling you, the visitors began in the present, encountering works that also belonged to their present, and continued back in time instead of starting from the past, a past unknown to them, as usually happens. In this case, the development of the encounter generated an experience of initial familiarity that then provided critical support in the transition from the present to a distant time. Let's say that the space of architecture is a provisional space. It's like a set arranged in order for art to make its appearance, an invitation to the work to let itself be observed and almost *touched*. The architecture is therefore conducive to contact with the work. The exhibition space must clearly be extraneous with respect to the work so as to foster and assert its uniqueness. There would otherwise be a kind of absorption, the work would be sucked back into reality. I instead believe that it's right to indicate a boundary between the work of art and the real space, thus creating not so much conflict as synergetic tension between them. In all the exhibitions I've curated during my life, I've therefore always maintained, or at least always intended to maintain—also with architects like Pietro Sartogo and Costantino Dardi, with whom I've often worked—a focus on modulating the relationship between the work of art and the architectural setting, creating a dialog of integration and at the same time detachment between the two. The aim is to produce a kind of half-awake state in the visitors, a state of attention and alarm, making it possible for them to go on looking but without taking anything for granted. An exhibition isn't a refugee camp—there's no need for drama—but rather a place and time of conciliation in which the principle of dialectic comes into operation. The work doesn't therefore blend into the space but neither should the space overwhelm the work. Not least because the history of the avant-garde movements, including those of the early twentieth century, has taught us how space enters into the work and therefore has a constructive quality of its own that then develops the final form of the work itself.

HUO: In the same interview, in connection with Zaha Hadid's MAXXI project, you talk about the "pleasure that derives from making an object and giving form to function," an idea that echoes the architect Louis Sullivan's modernist concept that form follows function.

ABO: It's very important for me that architecture should establish a relationship of balance with its function, a welcoming rapport, rather than present itself as something inevitable and ineluctable in such a way that the work becomes a comment on the space instead of being embraced by architecture that welcomes and celebrates the work precisely by virtue of its function.

HUO: How did you come to approach exhibitional writing? What aroused your interest in creating a simultaneously visual and tactile environment? I'm thinking here of the lengths of fabric stretched between the columns of Palazzo delle Esposizioni for *Vitalità del negativo* and the semi-transparent webs rhythmically demarcating the course of *Contemporanea*. Did you see it as an extension of your

critical writing?

ABO: Critical writing finds its place on the page, an initially blank page, and it's like entering a kind of limbo. This reverberates in the physical space of the architectural setting of the exhibition and the works. I've unquestionably experienced the feeling and the emotion of being spoken to by a work one way in the artist's studio and another in the exhibition space. In the latter, there's a joyful tussle between the different artists or the different works, a relationship of closeness or of distance. The protagonism of the work in itself is a temperate protagonism, one that the critic must be able above all to control in the exhibitional writing, in the positioning of the works in the space, so as to find a balance, so to speak. The exhibition generates an overall vision. It's like knowing a people or a society instead of just one citizen or an isolated individual. In any case, art keeps itself company. I even have the suspicion every so often that the works move around at night and then return to their places all by themselves. It's a childish idea, but one I've always had. I go and check up in the day and see that they're back in place, and I feel that they're looking at me sardonically, even though I can't actually prove it. For this reason, I maintain that art expresses itself not only by day but also by night, also in an oneiric space-time that nothing can eliminate, not even the spotlights, the lighting that reveals the apparently tranquil presence of works in museums and galleries.

HUO: You also teach. What's your approach to teaching?

ABO: My method is analytical and synthetic. Analysis, the history of events, figures, themes, relations, and presences, but also the honest assertion of the partiality of art criticism and its teaching. Critics don't work like land-registry officials or notaries—I'm speaking for myself and with all due respect for archival research and critics' archives—but assert their preferences. And I believe it's right to do so also in teaching, without arriving at the authoritarian affirmation of personal values imposed by the teacher on the student or the public. In the moment of description, this dual approach, both an-alytical and synthetic, finds a kind of cordiality, so to speak, which has always established a good ironic relationship between me and my students. As I said before, quoting Goethe, irony is the passion released in detachment. Some modesty, some flickering, a bit of cheekiness, understanding, and a certain degree of complicity are also present in my teaching.

HUO: In short, you're telling me that you teach in the same way as you organize exhibitions.

ABO: I always say that the artist is a biological error with respect to the work. The work sometimes lives on even if the artist dies. And whenever artists die, great silence falls for a while around their work, toward which the profound, Latin, non-nostalgic *pietas* peculiar to recuperation is developed. This is an aspect sometimes accompanied by confession, a female side and an element of transparency, indicative of a belief in art. In this sense, a lecture, like an exhibition, is a banquet of the arts in which the word is the *flatus vocis* that creates contact, through which dialog is generated. One value that's typical of art and in which I've always believed is what I call the *coexistence of differences*. To use definitions already put forward in this conversation of ours, on the one hand we have the *global*, globalization and also standardization, and on the other the *local*, which is isolation, dialect, territoriality. But then, as early as the 1990s, the term *glocal* came into use for the relationship between an international language and the artist's *genius loci* or state of belonging to a territory that's not so much geographical as linguistic and cultural. All of this I had not only sensed intuitively but actually theorized with Szeemann at the 1980 Biennale, the one that—as he put it—will always remain the “mother” of all biennials no matter how numerous and decentralized they've become.

HUO: The number of biennials has obviously grown, but there's also been a change in the idea of information. There's far more information available today and an exhibition now serves to provide an experience, as it were, rather than information.

ABO: Just as there are starchitects, now there are also “startists” and star critics rightly identified by the mass media. Expanded, amplified, dematerialized communication has taken the place of the

Biennale. You may not be aware that the Venice Biennale had a sales office up to 1968. If you wanted to buy one of the works exhibited, you had to do it through the Biennale sales office. Collectors and dealers bought works by artists awarded the Golden Lion or an honorable mention, or ones they heard about on the grapevine. After the uprisings of 1968 and the attack on the commercialization of art, the sales office was shut down. But then, in the 1980s and '90s, the economy entered the art system, the place of the economy was gradually taken over by finance. Art Basel replaced the Biennale, and the resulting legitimization put an end to moralism and the claim that buying or selling a work meant commercializing art. Everything went back to what it had been before.

HUO: If we're talking about the emergence of new dimensions of a format of experience like the Biennale, another aspect to be pointed out is the proliferation and poliphony of centers. Consider the many new pavilions at the Venice Biennale, like the Diaspora Pavilion and its tribute to Stuart Hall, what Isaac Julien refers to as "neo-diasporism." Something else that happened in this pavilion was that established artists like Julien and Ellen Gallagher took on the role of mentors with respect to emerging artists. I attach fundamental importance to this aspect of guidance, which can also be seen as a further *opening* in the multifarious history of the Biennale. As Édouard Glissant told me, we have to look for the utopian point where all the world's cultures and all the world's imaginations can meet and hear one another.

ABO: We're the children of polycentrism too, Hans. Paris was the point of reference for all the avant-garde movements in the first half of the twentieth century up to World War II, after which New York and North America took over in a period characterized by a monopoly of American art. If everything then underwent expansion and multiplication, it was through a return to the theme of identity—something present in theories like mine of a *genius loci*, albeit connected with the use of an international language—which also resulted in the affirmation of artists living neither in Paris nor New York but in smaller Italian towns or what were regarded as emerging countries by the European-American West. The childish need to take part in a gala event still exists, however, because these artists and these countries want to have their pavilions, even outside the Biennale gardens, so as to be recognized officially as cultural actors, different but on an equal footing. But think also, for the sake of contradiction, of the magnificence of shows like the one of Damien Hirst's work in Venice at the Punta della Dogana and Palazzo Grassi. An artist like Hirst, whom we invited—as I said—to my edition of the Biennale in 1993, indicates the transition from the *artist as worker*, a solitary craftsman, to the *artist as impresario*, where the artist's imagination envisages strategic control over the production, the communication, the circulation, and even the size of the work. That Hirst exhibition is in some way the other side of a mentality possible on a stage like that of the Biennale. While the Biennale seeks to be a gala event in which everyone wants to take part, Hirst hypothesizes an occupation of physical, moral, and mental spaces in which the artist is in charge of everything, all of the phases and all of the details, and no one gets in without an invitation. An exhibition like that opens up a new scenario with respect to the division of intellectual labor previously envisaged by the art system. Contemporary art needs exhibitions. While the relationship was previously interpersonal, between artists and aristocrats or the bourgeoisie, here artists create for themselves. This is another interesting aspect. As an exhibition, the Biennale is also assisted by its *trans* context, by a manifold ritual and a scenography that a city like Venice offers, in the final analysis, as an element of persuasion.

HUO: If we talk about *trans*, about the aspect of transdisciplinarity, and if we think about how to solve the great problems of this century, it will be necessary to break down these silos, these separate compartments in the division of roles and knowledge, to go beyond the fear of pooling knowledge.

ABO: Yes, by acting or continuing to act against the specific. Multimediality, transnationality, and interdisciplinarity have become a single whole, as is understood from the fact that artists are

incontrovertibly familiar with their means. They're not amateurs. It's not like the early videos, where the use of technology was so exceptional as to constitute a certificate of avant-garde status in itself. Now, there's control, the ability to handle one's means so as to develop an avant-garde narrative, the result of a formative process undergone by the artist prior to the work, which takes place through reading. I'm thinking of Philip Guston and his relations with poetry, with the poets of Black Mountain College, his friends, but also with the poets of the past.

HUO: If we think of all the avant-garde movements, from Surrealism to Dada (I'm from Zurich, where Dada was born), in every instance there's always a relationship between art and poetry.

ABO: In my book on international Transavantgarde, I included a work by Guston as a matrix of the Transavantgarde, and it's no coincidence that Guston, if you recall, came to Italy after a show of his in New York flopped. He visited Italy often, the first time in 1948. I remember that painting of his with the Michelangelesque element of the perforating finger that reveals the image-forming process, which also involves words of the poet in search of what's missing. But the future of art needs absence.

HUO: What's your relationship with digital technology? We're living in the age of information, but this doesn't mean that we have more memory. On the contrary, there's amnesia at the heart of the digital era.

ABO: Yes, and this is exactly why digital works display naturalness rather than deliberately experimental clumsiness. I remember when everyone was making films in the 1960s and '70s, after Warhol ...

HUO: In his excellent book *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964), Marshall McLuhan calls art an early alarm system which is pointing us to new developments in times ahead, and is allowing us to prepare to cope with them: "Art is a radar environment that takes on the function of perception training." So if we remember what else happened in 1964, Nam June Paik was just building his robot *K-456* to experiment with technologies that later would influence society. Of course, Paik, whom I met in the whereabouts of 2000, was also working with television to actually disrupt this idea of consuming media, of consuming technology. And he was actually thinking how could we do live satellite broadcasts to use that new technology less for entertainment, but more to actually liberate the poetic and intercultural potential of technology. This is a relevant question also for today.

ABO: It should be noted in this connection that what predominated with the early and later avant-garde movements was instead the ethic of effort, the ethic of experimentation, and this was the value sought by the artist. This is why I was talking before about the artist as worker. Paradoxically enough, we've now arrived at the point when art brazenly asserts its pursuit of beauty. Baudelaire said that beauty is a promise of happiness and, if you look, I feel that the artists of the latest generations have overcome what the ancients called *anxietas*. *Anxietas* was the structure: suffering was indispensable. Now we see that these artists don't suffer. And why should they? I'm not saying this in a negative sense, but in order to indicate their confidence. Paik, with whom I often talked, was well aware of all this—of how making a video wasn't enough. He felt the need to complete the video with performance, with our friend Charlotte Moorman, for example, using her back and her cello. The sense of completing the work in the presence of the public.

HUO: Hence the importance assumed in these pieces by the floor, the wall being the normal place for display. Sometimes it's the ceiling (as with Duchamp and his coal sacks), but it's very rare for the floor to become the major element of the display feature, a bit like a stage.

ABO: In connection with the ceiling, I wrote a number of books on Duchamp in the 1970s and also one on Arcimboldo. Duchamp is a crucial model for my actions and projects, the master of a critical irony that's exemplarily *trans*. As regards the floor, what you say reminds me of the happening. Happenings worked on the element of surprise, the eruption of a gestuality that wasn't part of the

economy of the context, that wasn't predictable.

As a result, the spectators were shocked and enjoyed the surprise. Something solid beneath the feet was needed in order to obtain this and it's an almost constant presence in my happening exhibitions, perhaps because of its surprise effect. And it will be so in Rivoli too.

HUO: The retrospective organized by Castello di Rivoli, which you've entitled *A.B.O. THEATRON. Art or Life*, develops on different planes: exhibitivite, encyclopaedic, and behavioral. Can you tell me about these three dimensions and why you've chosen to keep them separate in the show?

ABO: These three dimensions or levels encapsulate my attitude, not only my production, and therefore my intellectual adventure. The first section includes some works from some of my exhibitions; the second, all of my theoretical production, the books, essays, and catalogs; and the third, the behavioral, the performative dimension with which I endowed the identity of the figure I call the *creative critic*.

HUO: What do you mean by that?

ABO: First of all, a good relationship with one's own body. Do you know the nude pictures of myself I published in *Frigidaire*, or my TV programs? They were born in support of the sense of play that's always accompanied me. A critic makes objectively shameless use of art, but for a good purpose in the sense that success means the creation of a social event involving all of the parties to the art system. In 1972, I began a series of articles in the magazine *Domus* describing the structure of the contemporary art system that confirmed the division of intellectual labor: the artist creates, the critic considers, the gallery owner exhibits, the collector hoards, the museum historicizes, the media celebrate, and the public contemplate. All of this creates what I like to call *super art*, a value added to art that's a framework of global and collective creativity. In this sense, the aim of all of my work has always been to assert the autonomy of these roles—and hence also that of the critic, to whom I give a leading role and emancipation from a centuries-long history of subjection—and relate them to one another. And all for fun!

HUO: In the exhibition section, some of your shows become representative case studies of all the ones you've curated through the presentation of archival and documentary material together with works. Can you tell me about the exhibitions you've selected and how they exemplify the others?

ABO: The entire event is structured like a mosaic, reconstructing a path between various encounters. These are exemplified by nine exhibitions: *Amore mio* (1970), *Vitalità del negativo nell'arte italiana 1960/70* (1970), *Contemporanea* (1973), and *Aperto '80* (1980) together with the in some way preparatory ones of the period 1976–79, then *Avanguardia Transavanguardia* (1982), *Ubi Fluxus ibi motus 1990–1962* (1990), the 45th Venice Biennale (1993), *Minimalia. Da Giacomo Balla a...* (1997; 1998), and *Le Tribù dell'arte* (2001). *Amore mio* and *Vitalità del negativo* (which is connected for the first time with *Minimalia. Da Giacomo Balla a...*) illustrate my inclination toward thematic complexity. *Contemporanea* has the interdisciplinary character given to all of my subsequent books, essays, and exhibitions. What emerges from this sample is an exploration that necessarily oversteps the boundaries of art, for example through Fluxus, to which *Ubi Fluxus ibi motus* was entirely devoted in 1990. This again is an anti-system movement. Then came the edition of the Biennale that I directed in 1993 with its confirmation of a multimedia, interdisciplinary, transnational approach.

HUO: I always ask artists about their unrealized projects, the ones they'd like to carry out but have so far lacked the opportunity to make. I got this idea from Alighiero Boetti, with whom you also worked, as you told me earlier. Do you have any unrealized projects? Exhibitions you'd like to curate? Books you haven't found the time to write?

ABO: One idea I haven't put into practice, but not because I couldn't, is for an auction.

HUO: An auction?

ABO: I wanted to hold an auction of my ideas, to auction them off to museum directors and galley

owners. I've never put it into practice but I think about it every now and then. What I'm working on now is instead an encyclopaedia called *I portatori del tempo*.

HUO: A new series of books?

ABO: Yes, *I portatori del tempo* is the overall title, and four volumes have been published so far. I identify five kinds of time: comic, from Nietzsche; internal, from Freud; skewed, from Einstein; full, from Bergson; and open, from Wittgenstein. Each of the books has an introduction by a philosopher: Massimo Cacciari for the first, Franco Rella the second, the epistemologist Giulio Giorello the third, and Paolo Virno the fourth. The interesting thing is that here too we have art, cinema, theater, music, dance, photography, and architecture, all the languages. I examine how time has derailed all the languages in all the sectors. As you can see, I'm still pursuing my obsession with interdisciplinarity. (Once again, there are young scholars involved and I, unlike you, exploit them.)

HUO: This aspect brings us back to what we've said about *Contemporanea* and your edition of the Biennale, about their transdisciplinary matrix.

ABO: In that period, in 1993, I could only have directed one Biennale, but I told the president that it was necessary to organize one on a theme with all the languages together. This is the Biennale of the future.

HUO: In which there's no longer any separation between the languages involved?

ABO: There would be not only no separation of languages but also a cohabitation of events in the same period. And this will not hold only for something like the Biennale. Now that I think about it, there are in fact two exhibitions that I've never organized. One would be on nervous tension in the arts—representing humanity in all its creative aspects, as in a medical examination, almost anthropologically—and how nervous tension reveals itself as an alarm system that can degenerate into pathology or instead become a positive state of awareness. The other, entitled *Leonardesque*, would present contemporary artists who've produced or been asked to produce works based on the principles of Leonardo da Vinci, superseding the customary assumption that science is analytical and art synthetic. The book I'd like to write when I grow up is one on the portrait, again based on *L'ideologia del traditore*, published in 1976 by Feltrinelli, which describes the transition from the invention to citation that accompanies art conceptually through the century. The portrait thus becomes an attempt at self-defense on the part of human beings against the erasure imposed by history, which sometimes intervenes brutally. It's therefore a book of resistance, a study of the portrait that proceeds through all the centuries to show how artists have sought in history to escape from formlessness, to create art and science, and therefore to give themselves and others a face. In the end, art is always a battle against time. Paradoxically, regardless of all chronology, it designs the past. This is why criticism develops a complicity that permits perpetual motion of the work of art, which is thus able to travel or exist outside the contingencies of history.