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## ***A.B.O., or, “I exhibit myself, I find it instructive”. Annotations on some exhibitions by Achille Bonito Oliva***

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It is impossible to recount an exhibition. Words inevitably reject the centrality of images, their innate ability to create relations, connections, and bonds, their surprising superficial depth. Going back over some of the most important events conceived and curated by Achille Bonito Oliva in the last few decades reveals the originality of his intellectual position and the key elements of his system of thought, including his frontal protagonism, his practice of “exhibitional writing,” and the performativity of his criticism. This also means having a vision of contemporary art that is not chronological but rather instantaneous; it means “unlearning by heart.” These exhibitions not only mark and describe a period but also construct it, or rather, as A.B.O. says, “transform historical into critical time”—time therefore being understood not as linear narrative but as a tool of knowledge. This instantaneity, this fusion of past and present,<sup>1</sup> makes it possible to proceed *à rebours*, against the flow, to leave analyses and judgments aside and instead create temporal shortcuts that make critical discourse absolutely paramount.

### ***À rebours: notes on Contemporanea***

Published in 1991, *Die Kunst der Ausstellung: eine Dokumentation dreissig exemplarischer Kunstausstellungen dieses Jahrhunderts*<sup>2</sup> documents 30 epoch-making exhibitions of the twentieth century. One of these is *Contemporanea*, a large-scale multidisciplinary event staged in the parking lot of Villa Borghese in Rome in 1973, which constituted a veritable watershed, introducing a new way of staging, but above all of conceiving, exhibitions. A.B.O., the curator of the art section, wrote as follows about its birth and aims in *Gratis. A bordo dell'arte* (2000): “The exhibition is nothing other than the presentation of its organizer’s viewpoint, the staging of a conceptual spectacle in which the individual works now serve only as visual evidence in support of a precise argument.” In short, *Contemporanea* marked the starting point of a simultaneously ideal and concrete trajectory, opening up a space and a time that no one intent on being an art critic or curator would be able to ignore.

*Contemporanea (arte)* thus becomes the exhibition where all terms of artistic discourse, artwork, public, and market, are put forward anew with their specific values and interactivity, in accordance with a clear-sighted method of mobile planes in which the ineluctably progressive nature of art and criticism is marked with a greater awareness.<sup>3</sup>

All of A.B.O.’s exhibitions since *Contemporanea*, including the more recent ones on which this essay focuses, are based on this interactivity between the arts and inside art itself.

### ***Le Tribù dell'Arte***

*Le Tribù dell'Arte*,<sup>4</sup> conceived and curated by A.B.O. in collaboration with a large group of

scholars and curators,<sup>5</sup> opened at the Galleria Comunale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea (now the MACRO) in Rome on April 24, 2001.

Perhaps the last great international exhibition held in Rome, *Le Tribù dell'Arte* was a threshold dividing and joining the old and new millennia. It was also the place and time of a fluid encounter and intermingling of themes, motifs, and forms of nomadism that have characterized A.B.O.'s career, albeit combined in accordance with a deliberately unorganized and fragmented exhibition layout that puts forward no chronological and historiographic vision but rather supports history and reveals its encroachments on the future.

The spontaneous aggregation, anarchic attitude, and linguistic fragmentation that distinguish the mores of tribes and form a counterpoint to the standardization of social behaviors are offered to the public here as experience. By virtue of the particular praxis dubbed "exhibitional writing" by Bonito Oliva, the show becomes a mechanism of communication in which the critical design, the artworks, their interaction, and their arrangement in the setting all contribute to the construction of a spacetime that inevitably produces meaning.

In a period of transition between the second and the third millennium, after the collapse of the culture of predictions (ideology and human sciences), art constitutes the non-impositional proposal of models that are vertical and problematic, not dogmatic but rich in fertile ambivalence and complexity. In the present-day society of telematics and electronics, which tends increasingly to produce positive services but also to make the solitary user passive, communitarian strategy becomes a different way of inhabiting the quantitative space of the city, a producer of energy but also of solitude, aggression, and violence. In its mass-production of collective behaviors, the city also produces communities, which often tend, however, toward the ferocity of the pack, the emulative locus of actions that multiply the visibility of the individual; actions that are not always criminal, possibly shifted toward the cosmetic side of clothing and disguise, but always work to eliminate meaning and focus on the superficial aspect.

As the emulative result of mass society, the particular behavior of the pack finds its necessity in quantitative recognition within the group and in its evident solidarity. The tribes of art live instead not through parasitical mimetic behavior but through the creative multiplication of artistic acts that start from inside and are not superimposed from outside. An ethical approach demarcates their extension in a mobile, flexible way and counterposes the solidarity of individualities enhanced by similarities and differences to the quantitative solitude of the pack. The pack does not recognize the value of difference, it operates through the standardization of endlessly repeated behaviors. The art tribe, by definition, consolidates through common intent the coexistence of differences, guaranteed by the production of works that in any case share the same mentality. In their historical and contemporary form, the tribes of art developed before, during, and after the empire and the collapse of ideologies, safeguarded by cohesive, binding solidarity. The tribes of art therefore constitute a cross-section of contemporary artistic creation in pursuit of a balance between ethics and aesthetics in the awareness of a social value that art can not only enhance but also express to better effect in the face of an everyday reality ready to crush solidarity and participation.<sup>6</sup>

### ***Ubi Fluxus ibi motus 1990–1962***

The Fluxus movement had also been the subject of the show *Ubi Fluxus ibi motus 1990–1962* (Ex Granai della Repubblica alle Zitelle, Venice, 1990). Works by members of the movement but also by some of their artistic "fathers" and "kindred spirits" were used to express the concept—already put forward by Bonito Oliva in *Vitalità del negativo*—of art as an anthropological activity that

constructs a new cultural identity and acts primarily, albeit without neglecting ethics, in the sphere of aesthetics, with and on the language of art, reasserting its autonomy and radicality but also its capacity and propensity for dialog with the world.

The anarchy of flux, which desecrates the ceremonial of art, opposes the “phony freedom of the system” and establishes the positive value of laterality, becomes a magnifying glass to examine the end of the twentieth century and the collapse of the ideologies that had fueled it, and to begin observing the future while avoiding any predictions.

Driving Fluxus toward the twenty-first century means being able to interpret its anti-historicist spirit. Hence the decision to reverse the history, the dates, and the course of the exhibition: not from 1962 to 1990 but from 1990 to 1962. There is thus no bias in favor of noble ancestors or the past. It is the present that becomes the starting point capable of setting the pace for the visitors, who retrace from their own present the stages of an inexhaustible creativity that draws back with its traces toward the time of its foundation. The critical method supports the mentality of art, of an art with no love for chronologies or the ideality of a linear trajectory that does not exist out of the uneven paths of history. From the present to the lasting present of art. An attitude with no love for the preconceived notion of history as a guaranteed and guaranteeing process of the *flows* and *motions* of creation. History thus becomes flagrant regression toward the past starting from the *hic et nunc* of the viewers, who form their experience through the nomadism of their walking bodies in the temporal spaces of the exhibition made up of objects and events. Going toward the new millennium therefore means performing a new task, namely refusing to be bullied by time. In synchrony with the mentality of the Fluxus group, which has always avoided the danger of an art that imposes its exclusive treasures of formal beauty on the inert condition of existing reality. [...]

Fluxus means having the quick sensitivity to interpret the new methods both of art production and of critical reflection upon it. It means that the art *in situation* finds and sinks its roots in artistic movements and figures as well as a philosophy that stretches far back and leads a long way forward: Duchamp, Picabia, Cravan, Schwitters, Balla, and so on. Demonstrating that the problem of assemblage and the introduction of everyday objects into the sphere of art is not simply a problem of the postmodern culture, which identifies the possibility of cultural survival in the recycling of everyday life.<sup>7</sup>

### ***À rebours: notes on Vitalità del negativo nell'arte italiana 1960/70***

*Vitalità del negativo nell'arte italiana 1960/70* opened in November 1970 at the Palazzo delle Esposizioni in Rome. It was an event imbued with the spirit of the time, a time characterized by sudden social and cultural changes, great and confused hopes, and deep rifts with the past in the name of total freedom of action.

In the very choice of the title, a reference to Nietzsche's philosophy, A.B.O. distances himself from the different critical theories, including those of his own generation. Instead of ideological rigidity, he advocates a mobile poetics that deliberately shuns political militancy to assert the liberating function of art. *Vitalità del negativo* therefore had the explosive effect of a new and unusual vision that establishes the centrality of critical discourse with no feelings of guilt or inferiority complex. The “exhibitional writing”—in this case the result of collaboration between the curator, the artists, and the “image supervisor”<sup>8</sup>—takes on crucial importance as the plot of an offbeat narrative that unfolds through antitheses, juxtapositions, and parallels. The visual short-circuit produces an imbalance that constantly wrongfoots the visitor and presents art as a “magical territory” to be traveled through.

If art is to reach life, it must keep silent about its own need for form and act with the utmost freedom through the artist's behavior. In other words, the accent must be shifted from object to subject, from effect to process.

It is therefore not necessary to insist on form but rather to intensify the movement behind it, namely the process of creation. [...] Art as a whole has imagined a series of objects that have not in themselves modified reality but rather triggered a process of knowledge of the world in the artist to the point of presenting themselves as anti-objects, which broaden humanity's spiritual panorama and determine the need for a life in continuity with the artwork and for an artwork intersecting with the ways of the world. Artists today position themselves with rightful determination in a sphere of intentional dementia as a tautological assertion of their political and existential complexity. Where ideology is the possibility for artists to present themselves as a liberating structure constantly liberated from the world, emphasis and yardstick of their own emphasis, representation and self-representation.

This is therefore the time in which myths are tested and the exercise of imagination—starting from the negative of language as fragmentation of the human and confinement of the biological— has definitively conquered an area of “new metaphysics” where abstraction presents itself as the physiological ability to perceive the world.

This process culminates in the space of festivity, a primitive area where horizontal and vertical, nature and history no longer exist. What does exist is rather a landscape of signs, where sign is presence and presence is the ritual of a concentrated community that wishes to be perceived from the inside in order to establish a new way of existing as a way to eliminate the phony world.<sup>9</sup>

### ***Minimalia***

Already presented on a smaller scale with the title *Minimalia. Da Giacomo Balla a...* at Palazzo Querini Dubois in Venice and Palazzo delle Esposizioni in Rome,<sup>10</sup> *Minimalia: An Italian Vision in 20th Century Art* opened at the P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, New York, in October 1999. In it, and in much the same way as in *Vitalità del negativo* 30 years earlier, Bonito Oliva traced a wholly original pathway in Italian art, recognizing an “increasingly analytical eye in Italian styles” and an asymmetrical projectuality that employs geometry and reduction as fundamental elements of investigations but without forgoing emotion and surprise.

This reading takes shape here in the division into sections—*Art as Light/Dynamism, Art Objects, Autonomy of Art, The Being of Space, The Space of History, Art is a Mental Act, Surface and Memory, and The Combinatorial System*—inhabited by artists and works that display actual links or subtle affinities. This division makes it possible, once again, to abandon any rigid chronological conception in favor of a vision that “dissolves in the crossed-eye vision of many directions.”

*Minimalia* is an exhibition on contemporary art in Italy and in particular on the line that unfolds from the post-war period to the present, often in advance of other events at the international level. The precursor of this line of development is identified here as Giacomo Balla, a very great artist of the historical avant-garde whose paramount importance in the process leading to the birth of abstraction will become increasingly clear, abstraction being understood here not as abstractionism but rather as the ability to capture the image in its conceptual structure. [...] Italian artists have instead founded a different use of geometry as the prolific field of an “irregular” rationale that loves to develop its own principles by adopting surprise and emotion. These two elements do not contradict the projectual principle, however, but reinforce it if anything through a pragmatic and non-preventive use of

descriptive geometry. It is no coincidence that the artist switches constantly between the two-dimensionality of the plan and the three-dimensional execution of form, from the black and white of the idea to polychromatic articulation, proof that the idea generates a creative process that is not purely demonstrative but fertile. Be it two-dimensional or three-dimensional, the final form presents visual material that is not abstract but concrete.

The principle of an asymmetrical rationale supports the artwork that formalizes irregularity as its creative principle. In this sense, form does not begin and end with the idea, as there is no cold, specular relationship between project and execution. The work carries within it the possibility of an asymmetry that is accepted and assimilated in the project because it partakes of the mentality of modern art and of the conception of the world around us, made up of unforeseen eventualities and surprises.

In this way, the concept of projectuality is endowed with a new meaning, referring to a moment no longer of superb precision but of open verification, albeit guided by a method constructed with practice, through execution. [...] Essentially, the Italian art of the last few decades has gradually come to accept an idea of art as a reality independent of its maker and oscillating between the neutrality of analytical procedure and the partiality of synthetic procedure. In any case, artists stoically shoulder the awareness of the partiality of their own *Dasein*, eschewing the frontality of a positive role that now appears to belong to politics rather than the creative process. What pertains to art is rather the laterality of a reflective and critical position that uses language and its metaphors as a kind of Indian reservation in an unacceptable world. This realization gives birth to awareness of a role that, even when performed, can solve no problems outside of art. [...] Artists therefore measure themselves, albeit in terms of reflective laterality, with their context, developing a production of forms that rest more on the conceptual level of difference than the mimetic level of spectacularization.

Paring down any kind of metaphysical showcasing, the Italian art of the twentieth century seems to aim at stimulating the production of a different kind of visibility arising from the “mental act”—the work of art—so as to prompt constant reflective change in the viewer. A visibility that is not static and statistical but engenders new visual realities. Boccioni said that Balla “rigorously applies the theory of turning a machine into a landscape.” A landscape it may well be, but one that has definitively blossomed into a “mental act.”<sup>11</sup>

Adopting A.B.O.’s inverse approach of proceeding *à rebours*, I shall close this essay as I began, with the quotation that, in my view, encapsulates not only the exhibitions addressed here but also their curator’s joyful and merry complexity: “I EXHIBIT MYSELF, I FIND IT INSTRUCTIVE.”

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<sup>1</sup> “And knowledge can only start from our present. The past thus becomes a ‘pathway,’ a point of arrival rather than departure, and art finally loses the value of its perennality to become effectively the process of its own analysis and verification.” A. Bonito Oliva, *Contemporanea*, exh. cat., Parcheggio di Villa Borghese, Rome, November 30, 1973 – February 28, 1974 (Florence: Centro Di, 1973), p. 27.

<sup>2</sup> K. Hegewisch and B. Klüser, *Die Kunst der Ausstellung: eine Dokumentation dreissig exemplarischer Kunstausstellungen dieses Jahrhunderts* (Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 1991); English edition: D. Ashton, B. Klüser, and K. Hegewisch, *The Art of Exhibitions: Thirty Epoch-Making 20th Century Exhibitions* (London: 21 Publishing, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> Bonito Oliva, *Contemporanea*, p. 32.

<sup>4</sup> The scale of the exhibition was such that it was divided into two parts, the first running from April 24 to June 24, 2001, and the second from July 5 to October 7.

<sup>5</sup> The exhibition comprised 11 sections, some of which were divided into a historical part and the view of the current situation entitled “Continuity and Developments.” The curators were Sylvain Monsegu for Lettrism, Mirella Bandini for Situationism, Lorenzo Benedetti and Alessandra Galletta for the Continuity and Developments section of Lettrism and Situationism; Koichi Kawasaki for Gutai, Yasuyuki Nakai for Mono-ha, Ada Lombardi for the Continuity and

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Developments section of Gutai and Mono-ha; Biljana Tomić and Michel Giroud for Fluxus & Events, Jean-Jacques Lebel for Happenings, Cecilia Casorati and Viktor Misiano for the Continuity and Developments section of Fluxus & Events and Happenings; Lóránd Hegyi for Actionism, Dobrila Denegri for the Continuity and Developments section of Actionism; Alessandra Bergero for The Factory; Tommaso Trini for the Techne Tribe, Giulio Alessandri and Manuela Gandini for the Continuity and Developments section of the Techne Tribe.

<sup>6</sup> A. Bonito Oliva, *Art Tribes*, exh. cat., Galleria Comunale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Rome, April 24 – June 24, 2001 and July 5 – October 7, 2001 (Milan: Skira, 2001), pp. 26–27.

<sup>7</sup> A. Bonito Oliva, *Ubi Fluxus ibi motus 1990–1962*, exh. cat. Ex Granai della Repubblica alle Zitelle, Giudecca, Venice, May 27 – September 30, 1990 (Milan: Mazzotta, 1990), p. 13.

<sup>8</sup> “Image supervisor” was the unusual job title chosen for the exhibition designer, the architect Piero Sartogo, who eliminated any trace of a “classical aura” from the Palazzo delle Esposizioni in his radical transformation of its space.

<sup>9</sup> A. Bonito Oliva, *Vitalità del negativo nell'arte italiana 1960/70*, exh. cat., Palazzo delle Esposizioni, Rome, November 30, 1970 – January 31, 1971 (Florence: Centro Di, 1970).

<sup>10</sup> *Minimalia. Da Giacomo Balla a...*, Palazzo Querini Du- bois, Venice, June 12 – October 12, 1997; Palazzo delle Esposizioni, Rome, January 28 – April 6, 1998.

<sup>11</sup> A. Bonito Oliva, “Minimalia,” in *Gratis. A bordo dell'arte* (Milan: Skira, 2000), pp. 17–35.