

From: *A.B.O. Theatron. Art or Life*, exhibition catalog (Rivoli-Torino, Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, 25 June 2021 – 26 June 2022) (Milan: Skira, 2021), pp. 162-175.

The Don Giovanni of knowledge. A behavioral biography and anthology of “Aborisms”

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Achille Bonito Oliva works on the resistance of highly conceptual reflections, often transformed by scathing irony into well-known catchphrases repeated over the years—veritable signposts of the evolution in the thinking and behavior of someone who has chosen language as his *battlefield*. This is why A.B.O., to use his acronym and media signature, has always declared himself a “military” critic: his assaults are launched both as essays of historical importance and as devastating aphorisms, or rather “ABOrisms,” published in the press or declaimed in public appearances.

“Art designs the past and leapfrogs the future,” he has said. It is with this paradox that he has fueled his legend as a shaman catapulted into the twentieth century. Channeling the vitality of his thought and action into his innate playfulness and Dadaist sense of humor, A.B.O. describes himself as a Totoist, referring to the Neapolitan comic actor Totò—a great juggler of the absurd in language and the paradoxes of social relations. A drive for the creation of new scenarios appears to underpin all of his work. He can be described as the last punk because there is no rule, convention or protocol that he has not infringed out of sheer anarchism. As he likes to say, “First I act, then I reflect.”

He has, however, received numerous official awards, which he has always accepted in an ironic spirit. The first was when the French made him a Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres in 1992, a ceremony at which he declared, “*Je suis chevalier par la République française et piéton par la République italienne.*”¹ He was then awarded the gold medal of the President of the Italian Republic and the rank of Grand'Ufficiale della Repubblica Italiana.

Other titles and blazons of nobility derive from his family's history. The Bonito Olivas are linked to the Albanian court of the Skanderberg; at the end of the fifteenth century, the military commander Giorgio Castriota Skanderberg reached Italy accompanied by A.B.O.'s ancestor the Orthodox Bishop Oliva, who converted to the Catholic faith after the Council of Trent and obtained the title of duke, together with vast properties in the Diano valley in what is now the province of Salerno. Palazzo Bonito Oliva still stands in the old town of Caggiano, opposite Palazzo Morone, the home of A.B.O.'s mother's family, who were descendants of Celestine V, the pope who made, through cowardice, the “great refusal.”

Known in the town as the *signorino* or young master, A.B.O. was considered to possess “intelligence and morality.” As befitted the eldest son of a good family, he was sent to boarding school, the college of Sant'Arsenio, at the age of seven but spent only two years there. Though naturally painful, the experience is sublimated in fond memory: “I was found one night in the girls' dormitory with a copy of the book *Cuore* as a gift for my first love, Clara.” He spent many long summers in Caggiano, enveloped in the boredom of an isolated town: “I became an intellectual out of desperation, devouring all the books in my father's library and others belonging to the local physician.”

A.B.O. never complains, however, and always tries to see the positive side of every situation—“If you love life, life loves you”—with a sense of humor that he may have picked up from his father Francesco: “Do you like music, Achille? Good, help me move the piano.”

“I’m the first of nine children, which is why I’ve been a success from the start,” he says with great satisfaction. “I’m also the only one with green eyes.” He is very proud of his five brothers and three sisters: “They all excel in their fields.” But A.B.O. was soon to assert his uniqueness. The family lived in Naples during the winter months and he was expected to study law like his father, a high-ranking government official. He did so and graduated at the age of 21. Having developed a passion for literature and poetry, he then took another degree in humanities against the family’s wishes, which led to his allowance being cut off for a while.

This marked the beginning of an errant existence in which A.B.O. cheerfully invented all sorts of expedients to get by. First, he filched the keys to an empty apartment owned by the family in the city, slept there in the bath tub, and allowed friends to stay in return for keeping him well-fed. He then had a bed in an apartment overcrowded with students and workers in the old town for several months. Naples became the stage on which he made his way at a very early age into the city’s cultural circles, especially at the Guida bookstore, where lectures by visiting intellectuals were held in the red room. We can picture him with long black hair and a large moustache. Short and thin, he describes himself jokingly as a “*basso napoletano*”² prone to “very long and obscure” disquisitions. His involvement with avant-garde poetry led to contact with the Operativo 64 group, whose theoretician he became. The art historian Giulio Carlo Argan noticed him and brought him to the attention of the art critic Filiberto Menna, who taught at the University of Salerno and soon brought him into academic circles. This marked the start of a long career as a lecturer in Salerno and in Rome, where he is still in charge of the Luiss Master of Art course.

Since A.B.O. has always worked on and with words, the switch from poetry to prose and hence to art criticism came naturally. The first event he curated was a two-man show of Renato Mambor and Pino Pascali at the Guida in 1966. He also began an important association with Lucio Amelio, the gallery owner who brought the avant-garde to Naples with artists like Joseph Beuys and Andy Warhol, figures with whom A.B.O.’s close relations have been documented over the years. Naples was then a pulsating center of meetings between the leading experimental artists on the international scene. It was there that A.B.O. came into contact with Viennese Actionism through Hermann Nitsch, brought to the city by Giuseppe Morra. Earlier still, was a meeting with Nanni Balestrini and Edoardo Sanguineti that led him to join Gruppo 63, with whom he produced his books of experimental and visual poetry *Made in Mater*, *Fiction Poems*, and *Mappe*. This activity continued with Gruppo 70 in Florence, together with Eugenio Miccini and Lamberto Pignotti. He spent the summers of that period on the still wild island of Stromboli, which he describes as his “university of life.”

Major female figures like Topazia Alliata and Raimonda Gaetani took up the young intellectual and supported him in his early projects. His professed liking for women “from the waist up to the waist down” is the recurrent refrain of a life full of female presences that never impinge upon his rock-solid marriage. It was in the company of “a famous woman fashion designer,” whose name he has always refused to reveal, that he traveled to Central America in the mid-1960s and delivered documents under the codename Sebastiano at a tram stop in Mexico City to further the cause of the Socialist International, whose revolutionary principles he espoused. This previously unmentioned episode will serve on this occasion to flesh out the sketch of our “military critic” and his background.

A.B.O. moved to Rome in 1968, using the train pass of his longstanding friend Baldo Diodato, a Neapolitan artist and young employee of the State Railways at the time. There he soon found favor with the legendary Palma Bucarelli, director of the Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Moderna, who often gave him public support. He spent long summers in Tuscany with Maria Gloria Conti Biccocchi, whose house in Follonica was always open to her artistic and intellectual friends. Apart from A.B.O., the regular guests included Germano Celant, his constant rival, and not just at the billiard table: “We were like the suitors of Penelope.” The New York gallery owner Ileana Sonnabend, one of the most

powerful women dealers on the international scene, also gave him support on numerous occasions. The key woman in his professional life, and the one with whom he was to organize his most famous exhibitions, from *Vitalità del negativo* and *Contemporanea* to the much later *Minimalia*, was, however, Graziella Lonardi Buontempo. They met in 1970 during the exhibition *Amore mio* in Montepulciano, where his centrality was clearly established, both as participating artist and as a member of the working group. For his ten pages in the catalog, he repeated a photo of himself taken by Ugo Mulas, captioned with quotations from Blanchot which A.B.O. ascribes to Nietzsche.

A.B.O. has obviously had his share of adversaries or even enemies, and above all, misunderstanding. The exhibition *Vitalità del negativo* (Rome, Palazzo delle Esposizioni, 1970) disconcerted many intellectuals and aroused their wrath with its great popularity. They accused him of staging a spectacle at a time when contemporary art, in order to be certified as such, was supposed to be the preserve of an elite and a “slap in the face for public taste,” as in the days of the early avant-garde movements. The cultural revolution championed in Italy by A.B.O. had many victims, however, at that historical turning point, especially among the critics he calls the “Argonauts.” It was, however, precisely A.B.O. that Argan, the leading art historian and critic of the time, chose to write the closing chapter of his authoritative history of art, which has cost generations of students many a sleepless night. “This one will outstrip us all,” said Argan of A.B.O.. And he did. “It’s due not only to my merits but also to the demerits of others,” was A.B.O.’s sagacious response.

It was with *Contemporanea* in 1973 that A.B.O. really broke away from the existing frameworks with a colossal project embracing all the arts, from the visual to writing, music, cinema, theater, and performance. The impact was shattering. It was then that he became a media personality and began to appear on TV programs for mass audiences. Between such appearances and the organizing of exhibitions, A.B.O. found time, however, to go on writing fundamental essays and books like *Il territorio magico* and *L’ideologia del traditore*. The latter laid the conceptual foundations for his theorization of the Transavantgarde, the last artistic movement to enter the history of contemporary Western art. “La Transavanguardia c’est moi,” proclaimed its prophet, drawing on Flaubert. And his response to celebrity was yet another endlessly repeated quip: “I was an enfant prodige, now I am just a prodige.”

A.B.O. is truly unstoppable. As he points out, “Critics express themselves on three planes: exhibitions, essays, and behavior.”³ It is natural for him to go from a TV chat show to a lecture at MoMA in New York, a vitalistic impulse that he explains with this statement: “Eroticism is the ecological driving force of existence.” Hence his narcissism as self-awareness, for which popularity is the measure of social confirmation: “Popularity is the *prêt-à-porter* of narcissism.” His judiciously calibrated use of television began in 1968, when he was special correspondent for cultural programs such as *L’approdo* for the Italian state TV network. His famous report from Amalfi on the show *arte povera più azioni povere* also marked the beginning of his collaboration with Michelangelo Pistoletto on a whole series of projects, including the artist’s *Terzo Paradiso* (Venice, Island of San Servolo, 2005).

A.B.O. also became the author and presenter of innovative programs designed to introduce the public to contemporary art, accepting the challenge of appearing on state TV in slots for a general audience rather than the easier option of channels devoted exclusively to culture. In addition to endorsements for charitable projects with OVS and Save the Children, he played a part in the campaign to increase awareness of Italian monuments, including one of his most elaborate slogans: “Art massages the atrophied muscle of collective sensibility.” The recent film *Ouverture of Something That Never Ended* directed by Gus Van Sant and Alessandro Michele for the Gucci fashion house features a cameo appearance, where he delivers the line, “Fashion clothes humanity, art lays it bare.” Previous film appearances include the costume drama *Le avventure di Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (directed by

Umberto Silva, 1988), the light-hearted *Faccione* (Christian De Sica, 1991), and the bizarre *My Italy* (Bruno Colella, 2017). A.B.O.'s fame extends beyond the Italian borders and his books have been translated into a whole host of languages, including Arabic, Chinese, Indonesian, and Russian. Meetings with kings, queens, and prime ministers are handled at exhibitions and conferences with aristocratic Neapolitan nonchalance, and he delights in disrupting rigid protocol. He ruffled ceremonial feathers by taking the arm of the untouchable future emperor Naruhito at the inauguration of an Italian exhibition in Japan in the presence of Gino Di Maggio. Accompanying Juan Carlos I of Spain during a visit to the ARCO fair in Madrid, he unceremoniously introduced the king to the Italian gallery owners present and obliged him to shake hands with them. In Warsaw, while awaiting a speech from the Polish prime minister, he picked up the microphone and exclaimed "Vote for Antonio! Vote for Antonio!" just like Totò, an episode witnessed and still recounted with amusement by his close friend Emilio Mazzoli, a gallery owner from Modena and his companion in the adventure of the Transavantgarde movement.

Queen Rania of Jordan could not help but smile when he introduced her to another woman with the unorthodox formula "Queen, My Queen" during a visit to the exhibition *Islam in Sicily* in Amman together with Ludovico Corrao. He even managed to embarrass the Israeli premier Simon Peres during a lecture in Tel Aviv by arguing in favor of the Palestinian cause. Some may still remember him walking impassively through the long corridor of the great hall at the Beijing Academy of Fine Arts with a glass of vodka on his head before delivering a lecture. Balancing a glass on his head is a standard routine in the comic repertoire of A.B.O., whose points of reference in this field include Groucho Marx, Totò, and Charlie Chaplin, whose walk he imitates perfectly.

A.B.O. thus moves throughout all culture, high and low, to immerse himself in life in all its forms. He had no qualms about posing nude for an edition of *Frigidaire* in 1981, nor did the outcry deter him from repeating the performance for the same magazine in 1989 and in 2011, thirty years later. "I'm perfectly comfortable with my body," he says, even when photographed with scantily-clad porn stars, and readily lent his image in support of an association for the rights of sex workers in the photo comic *Cosa bolle in pentola* (Lucciola, 1985). He loves dancing—"I'm a dancer first and a critic second"—and forays into Roman night life with his friends, mostly artists. Mario Schifano was forced to admit A.B.O.'s superior staying power and delight in revels. Alighiero Boetti was his companion on visits to the night clubs around Piazza Santa Maria in Trastevere in an Alfa Romeo like those used by the police, as were Gino De Dominicis and Vettor Pisani, nighthawks like him. While this constant bodily engagement with life has sometimes got him into dangerous situations, he faces them fearlessly: "I'm not really brave because I don't get scared."

Nearly 30 years on, shopkeepers, hoteliers, and restaurant owners still recognize A.B.O. and say hello if they see him strolling through Venice. They have not forgotten the long year of daily contact when he was preparing the 1993 edition of the Biennale. He identified totally with that project and took full control of it in his own way: "I used to check that all the lights were off in the evening before leaving the offices."

He is also greeted everywhere in Naples, the city where he started out and the home of one of his completed projects, namely *The Art Stations* on line 1 of the subway, where contemporary art is incorporated into settings created by leading international architects. "I've created an obligatory museum in the sense that people are obliged to look at the works of art as they walk through the stations."

Together with his love of life, A.B.O. has always declared and displayed enormous respect for art: "I'm a Don Juan of knowledge." "Some are born critics, others become artists, and others die spectators." "The artist is my closest enemy." "The artist is a biological error with respect to the work of art." "The artist dies and the work, in certain cases, lives on." All of these ABOrisms help us to

understand, in ironic synthesis, his role as a critic in his relationship with artists and with the work of art, “whose value is sometimes not understood even by the artist.” This subject has given rise to some of his best-known quips, which raise questions that remain open despite their apparently light verbal touch. “I’m not a guardian angel but an exterminating angel for art.” “I’m not a curator but a healer.” While asserting the leading role of criticism in art, A.B.O. certainly has no longing for power—“I’m already a freelance museum” is his response to numerous offers of museum directorships—or possession: “I am possessor, not possessive.” He has built up no collection of masterpieces—“I’m like a surgeon, I don’t want to see blood on the walls when I get home”—but treasures the many portraits and photographs of himself produced by friends over the years. He has been depicted in the most fanciful forms, with two heads (Sandro Chia), three (Schifano), as a Maori warrior (Rocco Dubbini), as the Tower of Babel (Luigi Ontani), as a ballerina (Pisani), as a Roman emperor (Francesco Clemente, Giuseppe Ducrot, and Carlo Maria Mariani), amongst many other things: all tributes to a figure who likes to say, “I’m a thorn in the eye of art and of criticism.” Having crossed the threshold of eighty years of such a full life, A.B.O. can even joke about death. He fantasizes about arranging for his voice to suddenly ring out in the church at his funeral to play a joke on all those present, a counterpoint perhaps to the laughter recorded by Gino De Dominicis under the title *D’io* that played a role in A.B.O.’s exhibition of the artist’s work in 2010. He imagines a coin-operated telephone on his grave for people to hear his thoughts. This calls to mind the words on the tombstone of Marcel Duchamp, on whom A.B.O. has written some memorable essays: “Anyway, it’s always other people who die.

¹ “I am a knight of the French Republic and a pedestrian of the Italian Republic.”

² An untranslatable play on words: the adjective *basso* means “short” (“a short Neapolitan”) while the noun in Neapolitan dialect means a first-floor apartment of one or two rooms directly on the street.

³ This is echoed in the three sections of the show *A.B.O. THEATRON. Art or Life* at the Castello di Rivoli Museo d’Arte Contemporanea: exhibitional, encyclopaedic (to reflect the truly vast range of A.B.O.’s critical and theoretical writings), and behavioral.