

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. 156-161.

From “trans” to mosaic. The 1993 Venice Biennale: reinterpreting a format

Clarissa Ricci

If we are searching ways in which to think of contemporary art,
we need to think about the 1993 Venice Biennale¹.

Okwui Enwezor, 2012

The shattered floor of the German Pavilion and the liberating feeling of trampling the ruins underfoot characterized the experience of visitors to the 1993 Venice Biennale, becoming sedimented within the liminal space of many other experiences.² At the time, Hans Haacke's *GERMANIA* was first and foremost an emblem of crisis: a crisis of the political orders, inasmuch as it echoed the wars and upheaval resulting from the fall of the Berlin Wall; an economic crisis, which unsettled the early 1990s and the newly founded European Union; a crisis of government, particularly the Italian one, which was experiencing large-scale institutional and political breakdown due to the scandal of the “Mani pulite” judicial inquiry. And, last but not least, a crisis of the Biennale and its division into national pavilions, which revealed its obsolescence following the fall of the Wall. The 45th Venice Biennale took shape in the midst of all these crises, seeking a more open exhibition and artistic path.³ Entitled *Cardinal Points of Art*, the exhibition sought to offer an international overview of “the idea that there is a permanent exchange taking place within contemporary culture and art [...] of an art that thrives upon cultural coexistence and the plurality of languages.”⁴ This approach, which brought the Venice exhibition into line with some of the first contemporary exhibitions to be dedicated to the theme of globalization, is well represented by the hotly debated and not to be underestimated *Magiciens de la terre* (1989).⁵

The objective underlying the project was, nevertheless, to upgrade the most long-lived Biennale which was to become, to a certain extent, also the matrix for the following ones. Bonito Oliva strategically sought close ties with Venice, which led to a visible presence within the urban fabric, with widespread initiatives and exhibitions. He also focused on relaunching the international character of the Biennale, endowing the pavilions with a new theoretical framework and making them “transnational.”⁶ Unlike certain Italian colleagues such as Gillo Dorfles and Germano Celant,⁷ who had harshly criticized the persistence of the national pavilions on other occasions, Bonito Oliva understood how useful they were to the institution, given that they operated as partners to the Biennale in many ways, not least because they provided exhibitions with no additional costs and constituted an international meeting place.⁸ Nevertheless, “national representation” is not a neutral concept, amongst other reasons because communities are not only “imagined,” as Benedict Anderson suggests,⁹ but also nomadic. Hence Bonito Oliva's transnational suggestion: turning the pavilions into reception and *transition* spaces that would host artists of other nationalities or without a pavilion of their own.¹⁰ With very few exceptions, this proposal was received coldly by the pavilion commissioners. Andrea Fraser's audio recording of the meeting with the national commissioners,

which was presented as part of her work (*Garden Program*, 1993) in the Austrian Pavilion,¹¹ provides a highly effective rendering of the embarrassed silences of those who had no intention of conceding their exhibition space, highlighting the complex nature of a discourse that is still topical today. Regardless of this lack of enthusiasm, the image of Haacke's shards of flooring contained within a large semicircle with the word GERMANIA has become iconic.

In addition to this intervention, the 1993 Biennale is also remembered for other important episodes, although they have only rarely been linked.¹² They include the presence of young Chinese artists in the Venice Pavilion, the works of Gutai dotted around the Giardini, and the exhibition that paid tribute to John Cage. First and foremost, this Biennale acted as a test bench for young artists and curators—many of whom had taken part in the most recent edition of *Aperto*—who then went on to become leading names over the decade that followed. When looking through the photos of the exhibition during the days of the opening, we recognize the faces and works of very young artists such as Damien Hirst, Angela Bullock, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Matthew Barney, Maurizio Cattelan, Liliana Moro, Nedko Solakov, Philippe Parreno, Renée Green, Ding Yi, and Zang Peili, and as many curators engaged in their first important international projects: Nicolas Bourriaud, Francesco Bonami, Robert Nickas, Benjamin Weil, Matthew Slotover, and many more.

Approximately 80 curators and more than 700 artists took part in the 1993 Biennale, linked by an exhibition project that, according to Bonito Oliva, was not based “on unifying and theoretical arrogance”¹³ but on notions of nomadism and coexistence. Indeed, *Cardinal Points of Art* was comprised of fifteen exhibitions in dialog with one another and the city. Using a “mosaic” structure, made up of heterogeneous tesserae, this Biennale could not simply be defined as an exhibition. In an interview, Bonito Oliva said: “It’s not just a case of going to see an exhibition, instead one journeys through displays, conferences, happenings, films, videos, and musical events whose tesserae are found in each of the elements comprised of exhibitions, events, meetings, education, conferences, and catalog.”¹⁴

Bonito Oliva had already tried out an approach of this kind, particularly in the “open area” section of *Contemporanea* (1973). The idea of a composite exhibition that makes use of both ostensive and discursive events originates in the revisitation of the relationship between art and space in the 1960s and '70s. It was during this period that the experiences of Process and Conceptual Art, Fluxus, happening and performance practices took shape. The space became the ground within which the exhibition idea and the artwork concept unfurled, as in the case of Land and Environmental Art. Rosalind Krauss theorized the expanded field (1979), but Lucy Lippard had already defined the era as a period characterized by dispersion and pulverization (1972), two dynamics that find a parallel in the consequent fragmentation experienced by exhibitions. The Venice Biennale had already experienced this fragmentation in the 1970s, albeit in a contradictory manner. While, on the one hand, it had incorporated policies of decentralization, expanding across the urban territory all the way to Marghera, on the other, the division of the exhibition into pavilions with autonomous and independent displays had already, in 1963, led Lawrence Alloway to identify the “cellular structure” of the Biennale as a fault to be overcome,¹⁵ inasmuch as it did not allow for a clear and coherent exhibition line. For this purpose, during the period when the Venice institution was undergoing something of a reformation, the choice of a common theme had appeared to be an “umbrella” solution capable of bringing the various autonomies together.

However, Bonito Oliva distanced himself from the thematic approach that had dominated in the previous years, proposing to actually overturn it. He paradoxically responded to fragmentation with further fragmentation. This strategy proved to be a winning one. By not showing a unitary and assertive viewpoint, he offered a multiple and “cross-eyed” gaze,¹⁶ capable—in a multiethnic, plural, and global world—of interpreting the disciplinary varieties and the contradictions of contemporary

society in the multiple displays.

Cardinal Points of Art therefore became more than a title. It was a program for a Biennale that intended to interpret the “global complexity of art” in order to provide a “critical hypothesis” that would produce “projects of investigation into reality.” The titles of the 15 displays picked by Bonito Oliva therefore acted as nodes for processing his creative thought. *Points of Art, Passage to the Orient, Italian Work, Machines of Peace, The Rapid Sound of Things, Slipping, De-territorial, Aperto '93: Emergency, Figurabile, Journey to Cythera, Paper Walls, Leonardo's Horse, The Coexistence of Art, Art Against Aids, and Brothers* were, together with the trans-national project (in his sense of “crossing”), the pieces making up a complex image that Bonito Oliva intended to highlight primarily as a curatorial gesture.

The concept of the mosaic exhibition certainly echoes the idea of “archipelagic thinking” that Édouard Glissant had begun to explore a few years earlier in his Caribbean writings,¹⁷ and that Bonito Oliva certainly knew, partly because of his closeness to Alighiero Boetti.¹⁸ Nevertheless, his interpretation was closer to a Situationist approach, and the metaphor of the mosaic intended to suggest a multicultural criterion that had become part of the political debate in Italy in the 1980s.

However, the most significant reference to the mosaic exhibition can be found in the *Molteplici Culture* show, curated by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev and Ludovico Pratesi, which was held in Rome in 1992 and was, in various ways, an incubator for the 1993 Biennale. Organized just before Bonito Oliva was appointed director of the Visual Arts Sector, the Rome exhibition was created in critical response to *Magiciens de la terre*, which on the one hand had indicated a global opening up, but on the other had demonstrated all the limitations of an interpretation excessively marked by ethnicity and geography. In the wake of Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine’s exhortation regarding the need to develop exhibitions from “multiple perspectives,”¹⁹ *Molteplici Culture* revolved, as it were, around the overcoming of boundaries.

Despite not reaching a high number of visitors, the exhibition involved a vast panorama of curators—25 in total, from all over the world—who were asked to select the artists. The result was not simply a “best of,” but a veritable dialog between curators and artists, which went well beyond the concept of geography to grasp an idea of composite and multifaceted globality. One symptom of this approach is the crediting of participants at the end of the catalog, which combines curators and artists in a single list.

The format of the Roman show was not an invention in itself, but the programmatic intention of making it a plural exhibition marked out an inescapable path for a Biennale that was attempting to be not simply international, but transnational and plural. Furthermore, it was in this very context that Bonito Oliva updated his curatorial thinking, particularly as regards the “system,”²⁰ marking out the guidelines for the theoretical framework of the Biennale. He had participated in the Roman exhibition with a text entitled “Il sistema della Politica e della Cultura,”²¹ in which he reflected on society, the war in Iraq and Yugoslavia, and the conditions faced by migrants, indicating the capacity to respond to real life as a function of art. He particularly assigned this task to *Aperto '93*, which he named *Emergency*.

The circulation of ideas is particularly evident in the text by Christov-Bakargiev and in the definition she uses to describe it: “a mosaic of psychological, ethical, moral, economic, political and ethnic subjects.”²² Bonito Oliva developed this pool of stimuli, to which he himself had contributed, by relaunching it on an international platform that enabled him to exploit and make room for that which was fermenting during this period in time.

In its immediate aftermath, the 1993 Biennale was received negatively, and the impossibility to capitalize on Bonito Oliva’s proposals prevented *Cardinal Points of Art* from being seen from the right perspective for many years, only highlighting certain important episodes that were, however,

the result of a much broader project. The “multi-mosaic” assembled by Bonito Oliva in Venice is difficult to codify, but the idea of movement is what underlies the system as a whole. In this Biennale, the “circular exchange of artistic culture” becomes not only a theme, but also a functional metaphor: the event is no longer an “exhibition” in the sense of “display,” but the activation of a mechanism, of a “gesture” that subsequently has to be put back together by the visitor. It is no coincidence that Bonito Oliva often underscored the possibility of enjoying the Biennale through a sort of “zapping”—that is, moving through Venice “canals” as you would change your TV “channels,” changing path, changing route, changing exhibition at will. The great exhibition, with its fragmentation and dispersion, obliges the visitor to construct a personal map, following the practice of the *flâneur*, which Johanne Lamoureux had already defined as a characteristic of certain important exhibition experiences of the 1980s.²³

The artworks, the displays, the curators, the pavilions, and the *calli* of Venice become thresholds, as in Benjamin’s *Passagenwerk*,²⁴ and they can only be used and known through a montage that consists of asynchronous polyrhythms, which visitors experience through their own personal cartographies of the urban maze.

¹ O. Enwezor, “Defining Contemporary Art: 25 Years in 200 Pivotal Artworks,” round table at the MoMA, New York, May 2012, moderator C. Garrett, curators H. U. Obrist, M. Gioni, O. Enwezor, S. Cotter, D. Birnbaum, B. Curiger, B. Nicklas and C. Butler, <https://de.phaidon.com/agenda/art/video/2012/may/29/okwui-enwezor-on-the-origins-of-haacke-s-pavilion/>.

² G. Muir, “Gregor Muir on Hans Haacke’s ‘Germania’ Pavilion at the 45th Venice Biennale,” in *Frieze magazine*, 200, January 7, 2019, <https://frieze.com/article/gregor-muir-hans-haackes-germania-pavilion-45th-venice-biennale>.

³ C. Ricci, “Towards a Contemporary Venice Biennale: Reassessing the Impact of the 1993 Exhibition,” in *OBOE Journal on Biennales and Other Exhibitions*, 1, 1, 2020, pp. 59–78, <https://doi.org/10.25432/2724-086X/1.1.0007>.

⁴ A. Bonito Oliva, “Verbali LXI Riunione Consiglio Direttivo,” in *La Biennale di Venezia*, ASAC, Fondo Storico, sezione deposito, busta n. 114, July 24, 1992, pp. 19–20; a copy of the presented program is also enclosed with the minutes (Note no. 4032/92, September 8, 1992).

⁵ Bonito Oliva directly cites this exhibition as an example to be followed. See “Verbali LX Riunione Consiglio Direttivo,” June 26, 1992, *ibid.*, pp. 26–66; for a study of the effects of the exhibition, see L. Steeds et. al., eds., *Making Art Global (part 2): “Magiciens de la terre”* (London: Afterall, 1989).

⁶ “Verbali del Primo Incontro Paesi” (Hotel Bauer, July 3–4, 1992), in *La Biennale di Venezia*, ASAC, Fondo Storico, Arti Visive, busta n. 518.

⁷ B. Alfieri, “A Special Biennale Portfolio,” in *Metro*, 15, 2, 1968, pp. 37–71.

⁸ A. Vettese, *I padiglioni nazionali della Biennale di Venezia come luoghi di diplomazia culturale / The National Pavilions of the Venice Biennale: Spaces for Cultural Diplomacy* (Milan: Monos, 2014).

⁹ B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

¹⁰ C. Ricci, “From Obsolete to Contemporary: National Pavilions and the Venice Biennale,” in *Journal of Curatorial Studies*, 9, 1, 2020, pp. 8–39, https://doi.org/10.1386/jcs_00009_1.

¹¹ A. Fraser, C. P. Müller, and G. Rockenschaub, eds., *Österreichs Beitrag zur 45. Biennale von Venedig 1993 / Austrian Contribution to the 45th Biennale of Venice 1993 / Il contributo austriaco alla 45a Biennale di Venezia 1993* (Vienna: Wien Bundesministerium für Unterricht und Kunst, 1993).

¹² For a discussion of the 1993 Venice Biennale, please refer to C. Ricci, *The Cardinal Points of Art: Venice Biennale in 1993* (Venice: Marsilio, in press).

¹³ A. Bonito Oliva, “Punti cardinali dell’arte,” in *La Biennale di Venezia. XLV Esposizione Internazionale d’Arte 1993* (Venice: Marsilio, 1993), p. XXIV.

¹⁴ G. Wurmbbrandt, “Punti Cardinali dell’arte,” in *Business Art*, July 1993, p. 48.

¹⁵ L. Alloway, *The Venice Biennale, 1895–1968: From Salon to Goldfish Bowl* (New York: New York Graphic Society, 1993), p. 173.

¹⁶ A. Bonito Oliva, *Passo dello strabismo. Sulle arti* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1978).

¹⁷ É. Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, trans. J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989); *Idem, Poétique de la Relation* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989).

¹⁸ Regarding the importance of Glissant for Boetti, see “Édouard Glissant & Hans Ulrich Obrist,” in *100 Notes – 100 Thoughts: dOCUMENTA 13* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2012).

¹⁹ I. Karp and S. D. Lavine, *Exhibiting Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display* (Washington, DC and London: Smithsonian, 1991), pp. 1–7; cited by C. Christov-Bakargiev, “Molteplici Culture,” in C. Christov-Bakargiev and L. Pratesi, eds., *Molteplici Culture. Itinerari dell’arte contemporanea in un mondo che cambia*, exh. cat., Museo del Folklore, Rome, May 19 – June 19, 1992 (Rome: Carte Segrete, 1992), p. 11.

²⁰ The main body of this text had already been discussed in A. Bonito Oliva, *Arte e sistema dell'arte. Opera, pubblico, critica, mercato* (Pescara: De Domizio Edizioni, 1975).

²¹ A. Bonito Oliva, "Il sistema della Politica e della Cultura," in *Molteplici Culture*, pp. 52–57.

²² Christov-Bakargiev, "Molteplici Culture," p. 11.

²³ J. Lamoureux, "The Museum Flat," in R. Greenberg,

B. W. Ferguson, and S. Nairne, eds., *Thinking about Exhibitions* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 113–31.

²⁴ W. Benjamin, *I Passages di Parigi*, eds. R. Tiedemann and E. Ganni (Turin: Einaudi, 2002).