

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. 36-59.

A.B.O. regarding the archive, library, and observatory of Achille Bonito Oliva

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Foreword: on the letter “o” and certain prefixes

Let's start with an initial impossibility: the supposed absence or irrelevance of an archive.

Then an unexpected final manifestation: the book that you are reading and the exhibition that it does not document, but rather recounts.

In itself, a project such as *A.B.O. THEATRON. Art or Life* represents a real aporia, a dilemma between two opposing solutions that are both equally valid: the archive exists / the archive does not exist; the archive counts / the archive counts for nothing (quite the contrary, it is a burden from which to be freed).

On the one hand, this project is undoubtedly archive-based, as is the case for curatorial and artistic research projects that, at least in part, aim for the philological reconstruction of a personality or an event. In this case, the archive in question is the one donated by Achille Bonito Oliva in 2019–20, on the occasion of his eightieth birthday, to the CRRI (Castello di Rivoli Research Institute). That over the years Bonito Oliva created and preserved his own Archive will come as a surprise to many¹. He repeatedly maintained his anti-dogmatic aversion to archives, and particularly to a conception and practice of art criticism based on archiving, instead favoring critical activity conceived and expressed as freedom of thought and as autonomous (self-)critical and (self-)mobile reflection:

The critic taken as a horizon line, bringer of death and immortality. Catalog and Writing. Criticism as self-criticism, a reflective practice on art and an analysis of its procedures, the equipment necessary for the sadistic quest for the artwork, an investigation into the interplay of parts making up the system: artwork, criticism, public, market, and collecting. “Self-critical and Self-mobile” as a passage through criticism and its cadastral and notarial inferiority complexes toward art, the desire to overcome the gregarious role. Criticism as “critical thinking,” practicing its autonomy on a lateral basis with respect to the centrality of art and ultimately becoming the subject: from *voyeur* to *voyageur*.²

In the passage cited above, Bonito Oliva's position is conveyed in a truly exemplary fashion, including his use of two adjectives clearly employed in a disparaging way, such as “cadastral” and “notarial,” in reference to that broadly dominant form of art criticism that introjects its inferiority complex with regard to the artist (he/she is the only one free to think independently), and that has therefore historically accepted a “gregarious role” of service (there is a famous “ABOrism” that goes: “but does criticism [or art] serve or clear away?”), accumulating references, testimonies, supporting pieces, and documents to which to refer when expressing an opinion: effect of a cause and not cause of an effect. Never using the word “artist” implies a reinforcement of the equal role of the critic compared to that of the artist:³ a role that, while not that of a creator, is certainly “creative.” Bonito Oliva identifies the artist as a “biological error” with respect to the artwork, the only real term of

comparison for the critic-thinker.⁴ From all this it becomes apparent that, for him, the critic always travels without baggage, free both from the limiting condition of having to serve the artist rather than having a direct relationship with the artwork in real time, and from the constrictive immobility of the archive.

A.B.O. THEATRON. Art or Life does not claim to resolve this contradiction, but assumes—starting with the Archive materials themselves—the coexistence of contradictory elements as its condition for being and its loadbearing structure. *THEATRON* is less an exhibition or a catalog and more a staging or a tale, perhaps made in the knowledge that beneath every great story is a main character to be shaped, an adventure to be tackled, and a mystery to be resolved; in short, something dynamic and, consequently, compelling.

Contradiction entails a principle of interchangeability, a circularity between two opposing elements: either the one or the other. This “either/or” takes on a role that could be defined as “critical” when playing with words. What, then, does the “or” imply between the words “Art” and “Life” in the title *A.B.O. THEATRON. Art or Life*, if not an open possibility? The Italian letter “o” (meaning “or” in English), is defined as follows:

or, *disjunctive* (or *alternative*; or *coordinative* or *subordinative* [...]) conjunction, which serves the purpose of introducing an alternative between two words, phrases, or concepts, while leaving the option between the two open.⁵

Coincidentally, the same letter also appears in the acronym “A.B.O.,” regarding which I will cite a passage from another document found in the Archive:

Certainly, the reference points become the initials: A.B.O., the sonorous exclamation of an acronym that renounces intertwining and its own conjugation. If the itinerary is reduced to the name, then the initials become the supports of the sonorous architecture, the three compartments of identity, separated by the distance that runs between the three first letters of the name. The itinerary of the name initially seems to accept the subdued tone of the alphabetical order, it seems to follow the mechanisms of a turnaround encoded by use: A is always followed by B. The two initial letters of the alphabet are cordially arranged to support the identity of the name. The cordiality arises from the fact that the two letters are accustomed to traveling nearby, to practicing a relationship of continuity. With cruel docility, A and B devour the other letters in their comfortable compartments, absorbing the potential intertwining in their welcoming verticality. But the game is not easy, because the name rises up within the initials and assigns its completion to another letter: the letter O. But this letter transgresses the order of language, breaking the relationship of continuity with its two companions and ending up in an exclamation, in an O to be precise. Meanwhile it also hints at interchangeability, the sense of a circular reference, of a return to the first initial of the name and the alphabet. At the same time, it seems to promote this idea of interchangeability between A and B: A or B.

The dilemma of taking or leaving returns, driven in part by complicity between two vowels (A and O) against a single consonant (B). But fortunately, the letter O is placed at the end, it has not yet materially insinuated itself between the first two, it respects the inertia of their continuity and creates a system of waiting.⁶

Going against the principle of opposition, the “o” places itself not between the two alternatives of the acronym but after them, leaving them both suspended and equally valid: start and finish coexist within the circular time of an Archive in which there is no past but an eternal present and an eternal return,

reuse, pastiche, and self-quotation. And, opposing every attempt to serve the thinking of someone else instead of expressing its own, the letter is written as a capital and becomes “O.”

In order to gain a better understanding of how to approach the Archive, we also need to consider the significance of two prefixes, which would be tendentially opposed to one another were it not for the particular meaning assigned by A.B.O. to the letter “o/O,” which, as we have mentioned, causes opposites to converge:

auto [from the Greek αὐτός, “self”], first element of compound words in which it means “of oneself” (e.g. *autobiography*, *autograph*), or “from oneself, spontaneously, which takes place or is completed or functions automatically” (e.g. *autodidact*, *automobile*).

trans- [from the Latin *trans*, “beyond, through”], prefix that indicates the passage beyond a term, a crossing, the changing from one condition to another (*transform*, *transit*, *transition*). It is also used to form new words and names: in geography, with the meaning of “beyond” or “across,” in adjectives in reference to means of communication. In scientific terminology it can indicate the overcoming of a term (*transfinite*), crossing through a body, exchange, shifting; in medicine it mostly indicates a site or a method of passage; in biochemistry, in the case of enzymes, it emphasizes the transport function of a radical.

Applying these meanings to the criteria that generally preside over the formation of an archive means approaching the Archive as a type of rebel one. None of the material in it will ever be meant as objective but always subjective, an interchangeable component of an Archive that is self-reported and structured like a vectorial transfer between one material and another: a tool with multiple connections and ramifications and a vehicle, as we mentioned, of self-references repeated more and more frequently and echoing back on themselves, even if applied in different subject matters. More like a Labyrinth than an Archive.⁷

A last warning before entering the Archive: regarding “forgetting by heart”

On the basis of this introduction, it is possible to understand why the Archive contains very little material regarding the organization of exhibitions, instead featuring prolific information about their curator. What is placed therein is never a historical document but the trace of a discourse, which always regards his thinking in terms of its unfolding, expression, and diffusion. This is why, in the structure of a retrospective project such as the *A.B.O. THEATRON. Art or Life* exhibition and catalog, the Archive reacts and provides copious material, particularly on the encyclopaedic and on the behavioral fronts, which are the least tied to a rigid chronology and the least constrained by collective operating.

Here is the Library, an accumulation of books and notes that have not been validated and therefore archived as such, but kept only because they are functional for writing other books and further notes. Here is the Observatory, a Wunderkammer of memorabilia and trophies, but also of insults made and received, which in any case are demonstrations of a storytelling power that knows how to maneuver the mechanisms of rhetorical persuasion during its transformation into journalistic, radio, and television communication.

Meanwhile, the Archive says little or nothing on the exhibition front: a subject that, while not marginal or ancillary, is undoubtedly bureaucratic, a “cadastral and notarial” stumbling block that has therefore been expelled from the Archive so that it can maintain the lightness that enables constant freedom of movement in its investigation of Art, which, like the Archive, is an aporia embodied, an irreducible contradiction in terms. If the exhibitions exist, the Archive has little interest in telling

“how” they were organized (perhaps, if we re-read the papers, the only information present that the Archive is interested in reiterating is “why” they existed). Moreover, we know that the word “archive” derives from:

arche [from the Greek ἀρχή, “start,” “origin,” but also “command”], original substance and primeval subject of philosophical research but also of state construction (the title *archon* was used to designate the chief magistrate in the *poleis* of ancient Greece).

It therefore designates a place in which something is given rise to and, in doing so, a power is exercised, as demonstrated by Michel Foucault⁸ and Jacques Derrida,⁹ who configure the archive not as the space and time of truth as such, but of the discussion one decides to have about it: we do not archive what has been, but what “*is said*” about it. Just as in the case of Freudian suppressed memory, that which we have decided to archive (remember) therefore holds the same importance in the archive as that which we have decided to exclude (forget), inasmuch as selection reshapes to our will what the archive affirms: so, if the truth exists, it is certainly not in an archive, which at most contains an *archival truth*, which is partial and subjective, and therefore gives rise to the historiographic reality that, unlike the reality that has been lived, is the one that we have decided to hand down to those who come after us. To paraphrase the title of the work by Vincenzo Agnetti, *Libro dimenticato a memoria* (a book “carved out” from within and in this way “forgotten by heart”), which was exhibited by Bonito Oliva in 1970 in the *Vitalità del negativo* show, A.B.O.’s Archive is indeed an archive, but one that has been as well “forgotten by heart”:¹⁰ it exists even though it is almost weightless, hollowed out from within, devoid of everything the author does not want to remember, and not because he does not remember it but because it digresses from the story he feels it is important to tell us. We can therefore take heed of this warning too when making our way into the Archive’s two main collections: its encyclopaedic Library and its behavioral Observatory.

Encyclopaedic Library: the *ideologies of a traitor*

Having crossed the threshold of the Archive, the Library appears before us. Although part of it contains books by other authors, the main part regards a single author: Achille Bonito Oliva.¹¹

The first part of the Library is characterized by poetic-visual writing that is primarily collected in three books (*Made in Mater*, 1967; *Fiction Poems*, 1968; *5 Mappe del 1965*, 1971)¹² and that, flanking the contemporary research of Gruppo 63 and Operativo 64, mainly involves participation in public meetings and live readings. The multiple loose sheets regarding collections of poetry and theater texts represent mostly unpublished activity.¹³

From the mid-1960s onwards, a different form of critical writing begins, entrusted to the essays published in the catalogs of the first exhibitions he curated, which were still poetic in style: a “(per)formative, poetic and molding form of writing,” to cite an excerpt from a conversation between the author and Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev. It is precisely in the reinvention and liberation of language from predefined meanings that we can discover the artist’s favored method of expression, which he would also apply in the field of art criticism: a poetic form of writing because it was self-generating, and ironic because it was the expression of a radically independent personality who could not be aligned or assimilated.¹⁴ The transition “from poetry to prose” (to quote an expression of the author) is moreover sanctioned by a gesture of radical autonomy, which is also the only three-dimensional work by Bonito Oliva as a visual poet. Made in 1970, the same year as the first thematic exhibitions he curated, his *Metro critico* does not fit a predetermined and shared criterion of measurement but proposes a personal one, idiosyncratically split in two halves measuring 50 cm each. It was in 1971 that—with *Il territorio magico. Comportamenti alternativi nell’arte*—Bonito Oliva

published the first book in which he began to delineate his theory on art and to characterize his standing as a critic rather than as a poet: “This is the time,” he states in the incipit, “in which legends are probed and the exercise of the imagination is no longer the sublimation of a sphere separate from life but the hypothesis of a global integration in the packed network of events. And reality has ceased presenting itself as a public zone of productive events verticalized by a center of power, to take on the connotation of a free space.” When formulating his reflection on the artistic transformations that took place between the 1960s and ’70s due to Minimalism, Conceptual Art and Arte Povera, the critic does not interpret these neo-avant-garde movements on the basis of their materials or processes (as in the theorizing of other critics starting with Germano Celant, a term of comparison that would influence, as if in a duopoly, historiographic narratives of Italian art until at least the 1990s), but instead reveals their philosophical and anthropological components, concentrating on the capacity of language and behavior to generate an alternative vision of reality that is outlined as a “magical territory.” This gaze free from conditioning allows Bonito Oliva to act “against the paralyzed notion of poetics and [...] the persistent solitude of the object. The alternative conduct of art is the vital affirmation of the superfluous, the attempt to break the diaphragm, the deviant metaphor of language. The artistic experience does not become an appropriation of reality, but a model of amplified anthropology that founds a counter-reality.” In his festive celebration of play, in his recovery of the unity, totality, and radicality of the artwork that is subject to the fragmentation and separation of cultural phenomena and individualities, in his understanding of time as repetition and circle, and in his attempt not to separate artwork and critical interpretation, the volume programmatically rejects all aesthetic and political ideology and concludes with the following statement: “I am not a symbolic animal.”

In 1976 Bonito Oliva published both *L’ideologia del traditore. Arte, maniera, manierismo* and *Vita di Marcel Duchamp*,¹⁵ which seem to regard different—and apparently irreconcilable—moments in the history of art but instead delineate a transversal approach to the historical and artistic discipline, something that would characterize all his following critical and curatorial writing. His reflections on the Mannerist artists and on Duchamp introduce a method of art criticism based on linguistic and combinatorial play, expressive individualism, temporal interconnection and inversion, the practice of citation, and the adoption of laterality and a “crossed-eye” gaze as privileged viewpoints. On these very elements Bonito Oliva would base all his subsequent reflection throughout the 1970s, which largely paves the way for the theorization of the “crossings” of the Transavantgarde.

As early as 1973, Bonito Oliva had already curated *La delicata scacchiera: Marcel Duchamp, 1902–1968* at the Palazzo Reale in Naples, which was followed by a contribution to the book *Su Marcel Duchamp* published by Naples-based Framart Studio with texts by various scholars of Duchamp’s work (Maurizio Calvesi, Arcangelo Izzo, Filiberto Menna, Arturo Schwarz, and Tommaso Trini), while in 1978 he edited the collection of writings *Marcel Duchamp. Mercante del segno*. In these essays, Bonito Oliva identifies Duchamp—inventor of the ready-made (exemplary of an unfaithful quote) and author *par excellence* of the avant-garde concept—as a fundamental reference point for the re-semanticization of the object appropriated or cited within the context of the “magical territory” of the language of art. A work such as *Fountain* (1917) embodies this passage from the *representation* of reality to its *presentation*: the banal urinal, turned upside down and placed on a pedestal in a gallery, has not only become a work of art, but has also created its own false/other author (“R. Mutt”). “Stolen from the everyday life of the world and promoted to an artistic role by the omnipotence of the artist’s language,” states Bonito Oliva: to him the ready-made is synonymous with a game of “falsification,” primarily forged on a linguistic level. This means that critics and artists alike create using words. Furthermore, in the essay in the *Ubi Fluxus ibi motus 1990–1962* catalog, the author writes: “Starting from Duchamp does not mean remaining dogmatically tied to his style. Instead,

starting means and implies movement and change, breaking away from the linearity of an idea of progress implying fidelity,” thereby identifying Duchamp not only as the root of the Fluxus process of rewriting everyday reality, but also the first “traitor” of the twentieth-century avant-garde.

Appropriation and reinvention also embody the contemporary interpretation of Mannerism and its artists. The author dedicates to Mannerist artist Giuseppe Arcimboldo the essay “Natura da camera” in *Arcimboldo* (1978), a book with a foreword by the French critic and semiologist Roland Barthes. Famous for his portraits created by combining fruit, vegetables, fish, books, and other “inevitable tools [...] of the eccentric,” Arcimboldo was for many years relegated to the margins of historic and artistic literature because of his eclectic, burlesque style, which nevertheless reveals a profound restlessness in his portrayal of the human being and his relationship with the surrounding reality, to the point of transforming the natural into a supreme artifice. “Artifice, which is a sign of the new unhappy awareness [...] becomes the reserve within which to transmigrate one’s imagination, endowing it with the sign of the bizarre as approval of the separate border, within which one can exhibit one’s transvestite metaphors,” writes Bonito Oliva. “Arcimboldo respects the heraldic style of the portrait, that which enables the recognition and reference to the painted figure, while at the same time implementing a sort of sign machine that operates on the principle of reversibility, through a combinatory system in which the signs are intertwined with and correspond to the concepts.” Arcimboldo poses and stages nature, like language. The encounter with the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges would shortly afterwards inspire the idea of a co-written book on the painter of ruins Monsù Desiderio and of a book and conference (mentioned above) on the concept of the “Labyrinth.” Monsù Desiderio, or *Monsieur Didier*, was the name (not dissimilar to Duchamp’s “R. Mutt”) that groups together three painters active in Naples in the first half of the seventeenth century (the term *monsù*, which derives from the French *monsieur*, was often used by Neapolitan historians to indicate a painter of foreign origin). Formerly believed to be a single person, Monsù Desiderio was only identified as different individuals in the twentieth century: François Didier Nomé, one of his as yet unidentified imitators, and Didier Barra, all three of whom painted dreamlike and ghostly scenes, fantastical *capricci* of small dimensions inhabited by almost miniature figures against a backdrop of gigantic imaginary architecture. Associated with late Mannerism (with links to the scenic images of Bernardo Buontalenti and Giulio Parigi), the mysterious and plural artist known by the name of Monsù Desiderio introduces a bizarre painterly style, comparable to that of Arcimboldo, which would later be reworked by painters such as Micco Spadaro and Salvator Rosa: almost a premonition of twentieth-century Surrealism, which actually led to Mannerism’s modern critical and historiographical rediscovery. Arcimboldo, Monsù Desiderio, and Duchamp: artists who, during different periods in time, developed expressive strategies in reaction to the major epistemological and cultural crises of their era, coming up with counter-realities that place reality itself in check, critically rewriting it and giving the language of art the power to affirm its own counter-reality.

In 1978 Bonito Oliva also published *Passo dello strabismo. Sulle arti*, in which he states: “If reality is not organized by patterns and dichotomies, then art too interrupts the logocentric vice of Western culture, attempting a more complex and articulated strategy for the artist and the intellectual, a new position, the cross-eyed gaze of the organic/oblique. Because culture is material production, positioned within a specific context, it is history and not everyday life. The artist is organic/oblique: organic to history and lateral to everyday life.” Being in history but lateral to its everyday aspect makes it possible to distance oneself from current affairs, to free oneself from the patterns and dichotomies of the *hic et nunc*, to travel through the long time of history. This is why looking at one’s present time from a lateral angle means betraying it in order to connect it to other analogous times. This practice of “betrayal”—interpreted as an intellectual predilection for overturning rules, for contaminating references, for adopting the unpredictable—is what guides the re-reading and

rehabilitation of styles of art such as Mannerism, historically interpreted as examples of anti-classical decadence, at least until the twentieth century, whereas Bonito Oliva helps to rediscover their profound originality and inner avant-garde nature.

In *L'ideologia del traditore. Arte, maniera, manierismo*—with the cover of the first edition featuring the *Portrait of a Young Man* by Jacopo Pontormo¹⁶—Bonito Oliva rediscovers in the Mannerist artist “an attitude dissociated from the world” and “the operative assumption of irony,” elements that make him a truly modern intellectual. Exemplary in this sense is the *Portrait of Ugolino Martelli* by Agnolo Bronzino, published on the cover of subsequent editions, which presents the stylistic features typical of the Mannerist portrait: a restless gaze or forced expression, a refined pose, great attention to anatomical detail, clothing, and setting, internal references to other arts—in this case, perhaps uncoincidentally, to poetry. Therefore Mannerism—which “shatters the certainty of a privileged observation point” with its serpentine line, the tones of its color palette, its rejection of Renaissance perspective, its grotesque deformation of figures, its exaggerated emotions—is interpreted as an intellectual response to the crisis of the late fifteenth century throughout the sixteenth, which left the Renaissance behind and actually opened the doors to the modern era. Bonito Oliva compares this to the crisis of modernism underway in the 1970s, in a moment marked by ideological flagging and intimate withdrawal into the self, by a progressive distancing from an evolutive concept of art and the progress of its manifestations to enter the postmodern age. This was the moment when the passage “from invention to quotation” took place and continued to take place for artists: the focus was not on the creation of the new but the reworking and recombination of existing elements, and it became possible and desirable to go freely not only forward but also backward in time, in search of them. These were the theoretical foundations of the Transavantgarde: not a mere return to painting and sculpture, after decades of the dematerialization and conceptualization of art, or a *rappel à l'ordre*, but a new contemporary avant-garde, which was the only one possible at that moment in time.

Fluctuation in time through the history of art without the restrictions imposed by “official” narratives, reappropriation and study of its techniques and materials, free and eclectic quotation, reaffirmation of the *genius loci* as vindication of one’s identity, radicalization of personal expression and, consequently, narcissistic celebration become the traits of a language that is not only artistic but also critical, which the author claims both for Mannerism and for the Transavantgarde. Indeed, Bonito Oliva coined this name, with the publication in autumn 1979 of the article “La trans-avanguardia italiana” in *Flash Art* magazine. An avant-garde that crosses through itself, the Transavantgarde, meant as a new expression of Mannerism, represents the exemplary “great interplay” (both linguistic and historiographic) of a method of transdisciplinary research that went from “poetry” to “prose” (as the author describes his theoretical production) and that concerns both the history of art and the language of criticism. All the author’s subsequent publications on the shelves of the Library will explore this method in depth, on a journey that includes, among others, books such as *Autonomia e creatività della critica* and *La Transavanguardia italiana* (1980), *Il sogno dell’arte. Tra avanguardia e transavanguardia* (1981), *La Transavanguardia internazionale* and *Manuale di volo. Dal mito greco all’arte moderna, dalle avanguardie storiche alla transavanguardia* (1982), *Critica ad Arte. Panorama della Post-Critica* (1983), *Minori Maniere. Dal Cinquecento alla Transavanguardia* (1985), *Antipatia. L’arte contemporanea* (1987), and so on. In them, Bonito Oliva outlines the essence of his critical and authorial literature. But above all he states that—while the critic-author is no longer a “stage servant” of the artist because art itself is open to the critic’s mobile and reflective interpretation—he can and must work beyond the boundary/limit represented by the book and the exhibition (when the book is a catalog). He must, in short, leave the private space and time of the Library behind. “A.B.O.”—as Bonito Oliva would sign himself increasingly often from then on, reclaiming the frontal protagonism of the figure of the art critic and, in this case, his own

protagonism—is not just an acronym but the nominal synthesis and manifestation of a practice that goes beyond all patterns, dichotomies, ideologies, and hierarchies. The subsequent step will be the transformation of the art critic into a public figure: that global communicator who, as we shall see as we continue to explore the Archive, makes the world and the art system, of which he is critically aware,¹⁷ his own Observatory.

Behavioral Observatory: searching for what is *outside the painting* (art explained to children and porn stars)

At this point the Archive projects itself outside, on everything that exists outside and around art and that is generally not intercepted or considered an object of interest by critics. The author theorized this, starting with *Amore mio* and *Il territorio magico*, in the early 1970s, but with the success of the Transavantgarde, including in the media, between the late 1970s and early 1980s, A.B.O. no longer experiences art without life and life without art.

I must confess, as a curator accustomed to the protected environment of the archive, that I feel uneasy: I know I am in a risky situation in which the protections that the very strategies of the archive would guarantee are lost. In fact, I lack the sanctioning power on the basis of which not only the archivist meticulously carries out his archiving work, but from which the illusion derives, inherent to the archive itself as well as to its twin (the museum), of being in control, of being the one who authorizes the document to affirm history (in this case the history of art) for posterity, once it has been inserted in the archive. Acting like Duchamp, who transforms a urinal into an artwork by placing it within the space and time of the art establishment, A.B.O. mixes the Archive with heterodox objects and behaviors, amplifying (when he does not skip them altogether) those spaces and times, with their rules and rituals, sanctions and protections.

The very act of archiving certain covers of popular newspapers with the image of the art critic in the nude on the cover creates a certain embarrassment in me (poorly concealed from the female colleagues who work alongside me). Having placed the abovementioned covers back in their acid-free boxes, I find myself archiving a large poster featuring the following words (regarding the central image):

“FRIGIDAIRE 232 – March 2011 – page 10” (top left)
“POSTER FOR THE NEXT REVOLUTION” (top right)
“NUDE KINGS ARE OBSCENE MEN ARE NOT” (title, top)
“Achille Bonito Oliva photographed on February 14, 2011 in his home in Rome by Angelo Puzzutiello for Frigidaire” (caption, bottom).

I have observed that there are recurrent images in which A.B.O. presents himself to the photographer’s lens in situations that are outside the norm for a curator and clearly an exception: nude, barefoot, in underpants, stretched out on a bed as he interviews someone or is interviewed by someone. Moreover, alongside leaflets, brochures, and invitation cards (mostly to conferences and meetings with the public, or to events connected to exhibition openings),¹⁸ the Archive also includes an incredible variety of extemporaneous documents and even small freebies featuring A.B.O. as a character with a thousand and one different roles: A.B.O.-Achilles (a postcard features the image of a Neoclassical painting and the words “Achillion. The Triumph of Achilles”: it was sent by artist Jannis Kounellis, as we can intuit from the signature “Jannis,” but there is no message), A.B.O.-Napoleon (a figure from a historical album to which a cutout photo of A.B.O. has been stuck like a collage), and a very large number of A.B.O.-Totòs. Perhaps the most amusing is a card featuring the

words “THE GREAT VENTRILOQUIST A.B.O. MAKES DUCHAMP AND TOTÒ SPEAK,” with a pencil portrait of A.B.O. holding the Totò puppet in his right hand and the Duchamp puppet in his left. The fact that these are two icons of an expressive register that A.B.O. could define as “comedy-criticism” is confirmed, in addition to the books on Marcel Duchamp in the Library, by the qualification that perhaps A.B.O. holds most dear, by his own repeated admission, as a “Totoist” critic (a self-deprecating mockery of the various theoretical “isms” of the history of criticism?), or by the title of one of the television broadcasts directed and hosted by A.B.O. (Rai 3, 1998): *Totòmodo. L’arte spiegata anche ai bambini*—that is, art explained so plainly that even children can grasp it.

The A.B.O. of television is an equally complex subject: too sophisticated to be a neutral mediator of general TV, but too popular to reject contact with the large audience guaranteed by television as compared to books and television. Nevertheless, A.B.O. himself comes to our aid: when presenting *Fuori quadro* (Rai 3, 2014–15), he described his new broadcast as “not for *information* but *education*,” aware of the difference between the two approaches and the consequent need to find a register that conveys to the broadest audience the complexity of cultural phenomena without simplifying them.

He also stated that the broadcast was “intended for an expanded, multigenerational, Sunday audience. A plot that does not seek to be pedantic, but penetrating instead.” That which A.B.O. had learned about books through writing them was now applied to TV: he did not accept standards but reinterpreted them and managed to keep together aspects that only coexist alongside each other with difficulty (the principle of the letter “O”), just as Totò and Duchamp did: high and low culture, avant-garde and mass culture, Conceptual and Pop, Joseph Beuys and Andy Warhol... for the benefit of the education of a Sunday audience.

Even his participation in 1989 in a broadcast such as *Ars Amanda* presented by Amanda Lear (a showgirl and one of Salvador Dalí’s muses) or his appearance, documented by a photograph by Sandro Giustibelli, on a set created in 1995 by the artist Vettor Pisani for a performance at the Palazzo delle Esposizioni in Rome with the porn stars who featured in Riccardo Schicchi’s films (Barbarella, Milly D’Abbraccio and Eva Henger), flirt candidly with the idea of “penetrating” the collective imagination and, through the surprise effect that the “comedy-criticism” register allows him, introduce an unusual idea: that art can be just as “heretical, erotic, erratic” (another ABOrism) as sex, and certainly more so than pornography. Art also explained to porn stars.

His correspondence with artists is also expressed in contradictory tones. Some of it testifies to longstanding relationships, to polygraphic exercises in writing that, in the case of letters exchanged with Nicola De Maria, combine text and drawing, narrative word and poetic word. The majority of his correspondence (at least on the basis of that which is documented by the Archive and the Observatory) is comprised of missives of praise or advance notices of honors. Others show themselves to be messages of complicity: on September 25, 1968 Alighiero Boetti sent a postcard with the image of *Twins*, his double self-portrait in the form of a photo montage, accompanied by the words: “DON’T MARSALA YOURSELF.” But some record the inevitable contrasts that the critical autonomy pursued by A.B.O. was perhaps determining as a reaction: a small archival masterpiece in the “comedy-criticism” register is the exchange of telegrams between Kounellis and A.B.O. in which the former writes, on February 19, 1976, “IT IS PREFERABLE TO DIE WITH GAS AND ISOLATION IS PREFERABLE. SCRUPLES OF CONSCIENCE PREVENT ME FROM ACCEPTING YOUR INVITATION TO TAKE PART IN THE NEW YORK EXHIBITION,” and the latter replies, on February 26, “IT IS PREFERABLE TO DIE WITH GAS AND ISOLATION IS PREFERABLE. SCRUPLES OF CONSCIENCE PREVENT ME FROM CONSIDERING YOUR WORK IN THE LINE OF ITALIAN ART AS IT IS CLOSER TO GREEK BEL CANTO.”

Meanwhile, the Archive/Observatory reveals very little about his relations with other critics and

curators. Nevertheless, although the materials are mostly indirect, we can deduce that A.B.O.'s elective affinities were targeted at figures such as Jean-Christophe Ammann and Harald Szeemann, the latter co-curator with him of *Aperto '80* and, like him, author of a liberating and almost anarchical version of his curatorial task, in which art or life are—to cite one of Szeemann's titles that could equally well be by A.B.O., because of the wordplay it contains—*dAPERTuttO* (Everywhere).¹⁹ Within the sphere of the Library, A.B.O. himself states: “Both had a more complex and less schematic and reductive approach, open to philosophical reflection, to the diversity of the cultural landscape. They were two timid characters [...] they both shared a curatorial and not merely exhibitivie mindset. This aspect was very important to me: I believe in writing, I understood from them that I could also write with exhibitions and practice an exhibitivie form of writing. And I have to say that even the complex titles they both used—less elementary, less moralistic, less Franciscan—gave me more breathing space, producing an instinctive respect in me because they were literary titles, invented by two critics who did not love writing and who had invented a new method of doing so through exhibitions.”²⁰ A.B.O. loved writing more than Szeemann (and possibly more than everything else), and while Szeemann had created a “Museum of Obsessions,” A.B.O. is still thinking about devoting one to “Nervousness,” to the apprehension through which forms, concepts, and works constantly seek to express themselves.

In the name of this vision of himself, A.B.O. nervously brings up everything that he considers important to himself. The Archive contains a folder of ten graphic works from 1972, whose author is the critic himself, perhaps in commemoration of his training as a visual poet (“10 GRAPHIC WORKS BY ACHILLE BONITO OLIVA NUMBERED AND SIGNED BY THE ARTIST. PRINTED IN A LIMITED EDITION OF 125 COPIES. EDIZIONI ARTESTUDIO MACERATA ITALY BOX 18”). Each work is accompanied by the same image, taken by Claudio Abate (in which the critic appears elegantly dressed all in white) and by ten different phrases:

I AM ACHILLE BONITO OLIVA
THE CRITIC THEREFORE THE MEDIUM OF A THIRD PARTY
I AM ACHILLE BONITO OLIVA
THE CRITIC THEREFORE THE DEATH-BEARER
I AM ACHILLE BONITO OLIVA
THE CRITIC THEREFORE THE IMMORTALITY-BEARER
I AM ACHILLE BONITO OLIVA
THE CRITIC THEREFORE THE SOCRATIC FIGURE
I AM ACHILLE BONITO OLIVA
THE CRITIC THEREFORE THE LEADER
I AM ACHILLE BONITO OLIVA
THE CRITIC THEREFORE THE CATALOG
I AM ACHILLE BONITO OLIVA
THE CRITIC THEREFORE THE FATHER'S EGO
I AM ACHILLE BONITO OLIVA
THE CRITIC THEREFORE THE BETRAYER
I AM ACHILLE BONITO OLIVA
THE CRITIC THEREFORE THE HOMOSEXUAL
I AM ACHILLE BONITO OLIVA
THE CRITIC THEREFORE THE VOYEUR

The folder is introduced by a text entitled “SELF-CRITICISM,” which sums up the critic's position

of autonomy and thus the “power of the critic over the artist”: “Even criticism, as a superstructural gesture, participates in the superstructural system of art. To date it has explored the specificity of the artistic language/message, experiencing a situation of laterality compared to the centrality of the artistic experience. Criticism had therefore accepted and validated its fate: diverting the artwork from its autonomy to incorporate it in the art system, taking it from ‘inside’ to ‘outside.’ And the ‘outside’ does not coincide with the world but with culture, and therefore with a sort of unhappy awareness of being unable to be anything but the double or the transfer of the work itself. While it is true that criticism, through a dialectical relationship with the artwork, can further its meaning in art’s political and social collocation today, the behavior of the critic and that of the artist exist with a verticalized relationship: the power of the critic over the artist. The role of the critic now also has to consist of exhibiting and investigating his ideology, as a typical contradiction between the ‘neutrality’ of the moment of precise analysis and the inevitable ‘partiality’ of selective and discriminating power management. In my opinion, the critic’s behavior must clarify (even more so now that art also occupies the space of critical reflection) this historical and political contradiction: the ancient myth of mediation between the artwork and the viewer (art experienced through the medium of a third party) and a real exercise of cultural power experienced in first person. Self-reporting therefore entails the poisonous and narcissistic awareness that only through tautology, the pure exhibition of itself, can criticism ideologically fulfil its task.”

It is an exhibited and not a proclaimed ideology, aware of the contradiction that animates it between “neutrality” and “partiality,” resistant to that “outside” of the artwork that is not the world, but criticism itself. A.B.O.’s Observatory therefore seems to both seek the “inside” of the work—that “magical territory” that criticism expropriates by recreating additional simulacra—and at the same time direct contact with the “outside” represented by the world toward which the artworks are directed, often remaining ignored, misunderstood, rejected, or in any case inactive. Hence the overtly historical and political task of the critic, who narcissistically self-reports in order to carry it out to the benefit of the public. It should also be remembered that this poster was appropriated by the artist Vincent d’Arista—founder of an “institutional criticism” movement that animated the projects of the so-called *Non-Existent Gallery* in Naples—who made his own personal version of it that sounds like an act of full-on vendetta by the artist against the mediator between the artwork and public represented by the critic—a figure that, by the way, Bonito Oliva was the first to reject because of his independence:

I AM ACHILLE BONITO OLIVA THE CRITIC THEREFORE THE IDIOT²¹

The fact that A.B.O. himself maneuvered the means of communication available to criticism (firstly photography, followed by radio and television) is demonstrated by a photograph taken by Massimo Piersanti at the *Biennale de Paris* in 1971: initially A.B.O. appears in the center of a group portrait, before appropriating the sign that Gino De Dominicis was holding and arrogantly showing it to the public himself: “WHAT HAS DEATH GOT TO DO WITH IT?” As if that were not enough, A.B.O. resumes the self-congratulatory liberation from the subsidiary relationship with the artist by using a collage of his portraits taken by various photographers (including Claudio Abate, Elisabetta Catalano, and Ugo Mulas, who had already portrayed him in the poetry book *Fiction Poems* from three points of view) for creating an image used on the occasion of several events in which he was the protagonist. The result is a multiplied image of himself as he converses, as in a *Sacra conversazione*, with various others of himself around the fountain in the courtyard of Palazzo Taverna, the headquarters of the Incontri Internazionali d’Arte in which he played a key role.

This obsession with his own image became a tool, rather than a personality cult, for establishing his

“self-critical” role. The Observatory contains an image of the preparatory cartoon for the 1981 painting by the *Pictor Philosophus* Carlo Maria Mariani titled *La costellazione del Leone*, a recreation of *The Parnassus* by both Raphael and Anton Raphael Mengs and, perhaps, the most beautiful group portrait produced in Italian art during this period.²² A.B.O. appears on the left, seated on a hillock, as he observes the scene from on high. But he is not so much looking at the scene—in which Arte Povera and Transavantgarde artists, like the two decades of the 1970s and 1980s, are merged—as at his own image reproduced in a small painting, where he is leaning against a herm with his features. This is an Observatory, yes, but, like Narcissus, reflected in a mirror. Among the many portraits of A.B.O. in the Archive there are also two by Sandro Chia, who portrayed him with multiple penetrating eyes in one case and with two bodies and two heads in the other (and it is said that when Mario Schifano saw them, seized by jealousy or perhaps so as to add at least one extra personality, he decided to paint A.B.O. three times on the same canvas; in a more playful vein, Aldo Mondino painted the portrait of “Achille’s grandmother”). The only artworks that A.B.O. conserved are almost all portraits of him, and each of them represents the subject in a different and complementary way: from the one garbed in the style of Warhol by Pisani to the one by Alighiero e Boetti, which instead cites Totò, all the way through to the piece masterly realized on a reflective surface by Michelangelo Pistoletto.

A.B.O. stated several times that he is a narcissist but not vain: in this statement, and this is rarely the case with the author, there is in reality no contradiction, since narcissism is an exalted and exalting self-perception, a liberation and a reinvention of the world in one’s image, while vanity stems from a capricious sense of inferiority. A.B.O.’s narcissism, which also extends to his Archive, represents an emancipation, an awareness and legitimization of his critical thinking as resolutely autonomous, as something for which he is fully responsible. In archival terms, this sanctions a twofold, fundamental antidote. On the one hand to that typical attitude of the archive of focusing on the fundamental and leaving out the superfluous, and therefore to that ruinous rigid following of rules taken for granted and seen as definitive, resistant to changes in power, culture, taste... which risk impoverishing its variety or even bringing it to a crisis point. But this same narcissism, which forgets “by heart” much of what would generally be archived, is also on the other hand the best antidote to the—opposing—archive anxiety, which is self-destructive due to an excess of passion, and which claims to be able to archive everything, inspired by the compulsion to safeguard and hand down a comprehensive and exact (precise, rigorous, faithful, uncut) memory. This is what determines the “*mal d’archive*” analyzed in its psychoanalytical sense by Derrida, and its twin “*mal de musée*,” which was explored in depth by Maurice Blanchot.²³

A.B.O.’s Archive does not run these risks, but it is aware of them, and for good reason, which I will attempt to describe because it is what finally determines the achievement of one’s observation point, the Observatory ultimately chosen by the author. In *Le Musée imaginaire* (versions: 1947, 1951, 1965) André Malraux described the twentieth-century museum as a state in which art of every era and provenance was metamorphosed within a condition of coexistence that did away with all chronological, authorial, and stylistic coordinates—something that almost seems a condition for that imaginary museum described by A.B.O. in his theory of the “traitor.” From the point of view of the visitor/observer this translates into a new relationship with the artwork, just as Blanchot emphasized when, in reference to the museum, he described “that physical certainty of an imperious, unique presence, albeit multiplied to infinity. The painting is truly there, *in person*,” going on to add: “so sure of itself, so happy about its prestige and imposing itself, exhibiting itself with such desire to show itself that, transformed into a queen of the theater, it transforms us in our turn into spectators, much struck, then a little embarrassed, then a little bored. [...] Why do artworks have this encyclopaedic ambition that leads them to arrange themselves together, to be seen in common, by such a general, confused and cowardly glance that it can only flow into the destruction of any genuine

relationship?”²⁴ The artwork presents itself to us in the museum “in person” and, “queen of the theater,” forces us into the role of “spectators,” initially enchanted by the proliferation of its solicitations and then set aside, excluded from a direct relationship with it. This is why Blanchot perceives the need of the works to remain alone, as if they were closed in on themselves, “visibles-invisibles,” but at the same time their opposing urgency of being, each for itself and all together, “l’évidence de l’art.” It is at that point that the museum (like the archive) becomes “an image of the particular space that is the artistic experience: a space outside space, always in movement, always to be created, [...] which does not really exist, but only exists with respect to the artwork that is yet to come. [...] This is the imaginary space where the artistic creation, grappling with itself, constantly seeks and discovers itself as new every time: a novelty previously repudiated.”²⁵

In the same way, by accepting the freedom to perceive and recount the work not as an a-priori, but as a “magical territory” that embodies the evidence and the very experience of art in its free becoming and re-becoming, while eliminating the sclerosis and anxiety of the archive, A.B.O. delivers us *A.B.O. THEATRON. Art or Life*, the ideal self-dedicated museum retrospective. An exhibition, a catalog and a museum that have the precious and rare quality of being based on an Archive that has been lived, but without having lived for it. It is an Archive that does not only look to the past, but also puts itself forward as a prospect, which is still waiting for “the essence of art” to reveal itself, which becomes a daily exercise in defining “the artistic experience.” A cross-eyed, incomplete and obsessive, unmindful and passionate, unpredictable and replicated Archive. Perhaps exactly because of this, it shows itself to be surprisingly light and knowingly deep, like the Art it has experienced, like the Life that created it.²⁶

¹ From now on, whenever it is mentioned in the text, Bonito Oliva’s archive is written with a capital letter, like the “A” at the beginning of the acronym A.B.O. The same principle is adopted in the text to indicate his Library (Biblioteca in Italian) and his Observatory (“O”).

² A. Bonito Oliva, *Autocritico automobile. Attraverso le avanguardie* (Milan: Edizioni il Formichiere, 1977), back cover.

³ In a fax from Emilio Prini to Bonito Oliva in the Archive, dated November 3, 2001, we read a statement that almost seems to accept and ironically repropose the challenge: “Artist is pariah and lives in a chamber of air. The critic, as the lyrical interpreter, lives in a critical environment.”

⁴ ABOristic statements made various times in essays, interviews and speeches by Bonito Oliva.

⁵ As in the other recurrences that follow, the quote is translated, with some revisions, from the *Vocabolario online Treccani*.

⁶ A. Bonito Oliva, “A.B.O. Itinerario di un nome,” in *Aut Trib 17139*, 3, 3, Rome, March 1979. The exergue features a quote from Friedrich Nietzsche, an author already cited by Bonito Oliva in his contribution to the *Amore mio* exhibition catalog in 1970 (although, as we shall see, with another attribution): “Behind every cave there does not still lie, and must lie, an even deeper cavern—a more comprehensive, stranger, richer world beyond the surface, an abyss behind every reason, under every ‘foundation.’”

⁷ Subject of a publication (A. Bonito Oliva, *Labirinto*, Milan: UNI, 1979) and a conference held in 1981, on which Bonito Oliva worked after his meeting with the Argentine writer Jorge Louis Borges.

⁸ M. Foucault, *L’Archéologie du savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969).

⁹ J. Derrida, *Mal d’archive: une impression freudienne* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1995).

¹⁰ The concept is authorized by the author himself, who adopts the title “Memoria del dimenticare (a memoria). Conversazione con Achille Bonito Oliva” for his interview with Stefano Chiodi in the re-edition of *Il territorio magico. Comportamenti alternativi nell’arte* (Florence: Le Lettere, 2009), pp. 247–66.

¹¹ This chapter does not examine the corpus as a whole and the internal division between the various writings by Bonito Oliva—regarding which, see the essays in this catalog by Marcella Beccaria, Stefano Chiodi, Andrea Cortellesa, and Carlo Falciani—but reflects on how the definition of the author’s critical method has a direct effect on his research activity and, as a result, on the formation of his Archive.

¹² For all the references to the author’s books cited subsequently, please refer to the Bibliography in this catalog. The page numbers of the various quotes are only mentioned if they are not quotes by Bonito Oliva or from interviews between him and another author.

¹³ The very first unpublished text stored in the Archive, probably written in the 1950s, is titled *Io*.

¹⁴ It should be remembered that the first major exhibition in which Bonito Oliva began his activity as a curator—*Amore mio*, Palazzo Ricci, Montepulciano, 1970—was not technically curated by him. Indeed, he actually featured among the

artists, who were self-elected, and he acted as the “general secretary.” Far from being a *diminutio*, this could constitute the first sign of his awareness of being able to play several roles and therefore mark the genesis of a curatorial figure able to intellectually and structurally impose his *persona* (“mask,” in Latin) in the presence of that of the artist. Moreover, in the same exhibition, the value of the “I” re-emerged with respect to the ideological, collective, and assembled “us” of previous exhibitions, such as *arte povera più azioni povere* curated by Germano Celant in 1968 at the Antichi Arsenali della Repubblica in Amalfi. In relation to this exhibition, while Bonito Oliva participated in the *Assembly of critics*, he also recorded his commentary on the exhibition for Rai, becoming a media presence that would be amplified and developed over future decades.

¹⁵ The following paragraphs, through to the end of the chapter, were written in collaboration with Alessandra Troncone.

¹⁶ The original attribution to him by Giuliano Briganti was recently converted by Carlo Falciani, who changed it to Jacopo Foschi.

¹⁷ After the first remarks in articles and essays written in the early 1970s, see A. Bonito Oliva, *Arte e sistema dell'arte. Opera, pubblico, critica, mercato* (Pescara: De Domizio Edizioni, 1975).

¹⁸ Nevertheless, the most extensive type of documentary material on exhibitions contained in the Archive is represented, uncoincidentally, by the collections of the relative press reviews.

¹⁹ Title of the 1999 Venice Biennale, curated by Szeemann six years after the edition curated by A.B.O., referring to and expanding the title of their *Aperto '80* exhibition.

²⁰ Memoria del dimenticare (a memoria),” p. 258.

²¹ D’Arista’s posters, which were attached on the walls of the city of Naples, do not have an English translation.

²² As pointed out by Laura Cherubini, next to the canvas and its preparatory cartoon Mariani had placed a typewritten text that revealed “in a manner not devoid of irony” the stylistic ideals of each contemporary artist depicted (without naming them). The incipit was revealing: “A great undertaking for the glory and happiness of the country. Modern Tragedies, or anecdotes collected from what we saw in Rome in 1980, after the return to painting and the ancient.”

²³ M. Blanchot, “Le mal de musée,” 1957, in Idem, *L’amitié* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), pp. 52–61 (the same author is the source of the quotes—from *Lo spazio letterario*, Turin: Einaudi, 1967, pp. 91–97—that, accompanying a photographic self-portrait of A.B.O. by Mulas, make up the artist’s contribution to the *Amore mio* exh. cat.).

²⁴ Ibid., p. 56: “quelle certitude physique d’une présence impérieuse, unique, quoique indéfiniment multipliée. La peinture est vraiment là, en personne [...] si sûre d’elle-même, si contente de ses prestiges et s’imposant, s’exposant par une telle volonté de spectacle que, transformé en reine du théâtre, elle nous trans-forme en notre tour en spectateurs, très impressionnés, puis un peu gênés, plus un peu ennuyés. [...] Pourquoi les œuvres artistiques ont-elles cette ambition encyclopédique qui les conduit à se disposer ensemble, pour être vues en commun, par un regard si général, si confus et si lâche qu’il ne peut s’ensuire apparemment que la destruction de tout rapport véritable?”

²⁵ Ibid., pp. 57–58: “une image de l’espace particulier qu’est l’expérience artistique: espace hors de l’espace, toujours en mouvement, toujours à créer, [...] qui n’existe pas réellement, n’existe qu’au regard de l’œuvre encore à venir. [...] Il est l’espace imaginaire où la création artistique, aux prises avec elle-même, se cherche sans cesse pour se découvrir chaque fois comme à nouveau, nouveauté par avance répudiée.”

²⁶ I would like to thank Pina De Luca, Sara Matetich, Stefania Zuliani, Clarissa Ricci, and Chiara Tartarini, whose writings and conversations have guided me in these reflections—many of which can be attributed to them—on the archive and the museum. I would also like to thank Laura Cherubini for having challenged me to try to understand the aporia of this Archive. And above all, I wish to thank Paola Marino, who showed it to me, with such perseverance and kindness, and Achille Bonito Oliva (A.B.O.) and Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev (C.C.B.) for having granted me the extraordinary opportunity to be one of the first permitted to study it.