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How many words should I write?

Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev

The process that transformed Achille Bonito Oliva from curator to the topic of a curatorial project began in 2019, when I invited him to give a talk at the performative event *For an Imaginist Renewal of the World. The Alba Congress: 1956–2019*.¹ Hosted in September 2019, it was a re-enactment of an embryonic meeting organized by Pinot Gallizio, Piero Simondo, and Elena Verrone back in 1956, to gather together young international artists, from Asger Jorn to Guy Debord. Although Debord did not attend it, this meeting marked the birth of Situationism, which he officially founded the following year. Situationism emerged in the mid-1950s on the one hand out of the expressionistic painting movement CoBrA (1948–51), founded by Jorn, and on the other from Lettrism, a French current of experimental visual poetry founded by Isidore Isou in the early 1940s, which itself emerged out of Surrealism and Dadaism. Situationism anticipated the revolutionary attitude of merging art and life that would later be typical of Fluxus, a transdisciplinary movement between art, poetry, and music that Bonito Oliva has always appreciated. Fluxus was founded by the Lithuanian artist George Maciunas in 1962, but has roots in America in the experiments of the artist and composer John Cage, with the participation of the poets Dick Higgins, George Brecht, and Yoko Ono, as well as of the experimental filmmaker Jonas Mekas. In Italy, Fluxus was related to Giuseppe Chiari and Walter Marchetti. In addition to the well-known Fluxus Festivals that anticipated performance art festivals of the 1970s, it is also in the context of Fluxus that video art began with Nam June Paik; video art was initially seen as a radical gesture of openness to the world through anti-elitist distribution, in the new era of television, of recorded art.

In his performative lecture at the new *Alba Congress* in 2019, Bonito Oliva evoked the influence of Situationism on the art movements that followed. He was at once a 79-year-old speaker and a character to speak about—a myth, an object of study himself. The donation of his archive to the new CRRRI – Castello di Rivoli Research Institute happened a year later. Our study of his curatorial practice for the purpose of creating an exhibition that could reconstruct his research and development is also an attempt to read our era as entirely focused on the “here and now,” made up of SMS and WhatsApp messages, where likes and tweets flow in a society of immediate externalization and equally fast amnesia, an era of Big Data in which those who succeed do so through their ability to “curate” reality, to bring out and foresee patterns and trends, to analyze and reduce data sets via selective processes. We are living in the era of the “curator,” and we are all curators and content producers at once: we curate our playlists, our living rooms, our lovers, our “bubbles,” and digital communities of influencers.

This Lacanian “era of the mirror” seems to be a time of absolute narcissism, which began with the use of television at home in the 1960s and reached its peak thirty years later with the invention of the smartphone. By integrating computer and telephone, the smartphone was able to invert body and prostheses to the degree that we have become mere appendixes of our devices.

Or maybe not.

Bonito Oliva inaugurates at the beginning of the 1970s the figure of an expressive, histrionic, experimental curator, at the same time encyclopedically knowledgeable and performative, a companion of the artists, in sharp contrast with traditional art critics who, prior to him, created exhibitions based on presumed scholarly criteria of selection and interpretation. He contributed to defining radical lines of research, such as, in the late 1970s, those relating to the Italian Transavanguardia, in dialectical counterpoint with the research of the previous decade, including Arte Povera and Conceptual Art, and supported by refined reinterpretations of movements such as that of Italian and European Mannerism.² His critical and exhibition writing, as well as curatorial invention and communicative provocation, constitute a dynamic continuum, characterized by the constant relationship between word and image, and an attention to the transversality and nomadism of art, as well as of life.

Prior to Bonito Oliva, art critics wrote in exhibition catalogs or in newspapers, and published books that were often collections of texts that had first appeared in magazines and publications; when they selected artists, they were called “commissioners,” almost as if they were a body of the State Police. Only with his *Aperto '80* did the Venice Biennale begin to adopt the term “curator” to define the role of Harald Szeemann and Bonito Oliva himself, under the director of the Visual Arts Section Luigi Carluccio.

As a young man, Bonito Oliva was very fond of Emilio Villa (1914–2003), the poet and biblical scholar fascinated by the *parole in libertà* of the Futurists, as well as a precursor of the avant-garde Gruppo 63 and a theorist of the artistic movement Gruppo Origine after World War II, which fully acknowledged the importance of Alberto Burri.

Bonito Oliva was appreciated by art historians such as Giulio Carlo Argan (1909–1992), who entrusted him with the last volume of his famous *Art History*, and Filiberto Menna (1926–1988), who was 13 years older, assisting him in the organization of various exhibitions and then collaborating on an equal basis.

The same age as Germano Celant (1940–2020), who theorized Arte Povera in 1967 in the magazine *Flash Art*, in 1979 Bonito Oliva established the term Transavanguardia in the same magazine to identify an artistic position of non-linear hybridization of different histories, based on the use of media, techniques, and styles of any era. This implied a redesigning of the past in the present, definitively freeing advanced art from the obligation to make innovative contributions, contrary to the so-called “Neo-avant-garde” in vogue from the 1960s onwards. If Celant has always valued objectivity and scholarly rigor, and has supported artists capable of “bringing the world into the world”—to use the words of Alighiero Boetti— channeling the transformative energy of materials, Bonito Oliva has instead always appreciated the creativity of proceeding along a path parallel to that of the artists, to the detriment of positivistic thought and in favor of vitality and freedom. This anti-bourgeois position recalls the Dadaist and later Situationist and Fluxus characteristics of the hedonistic sensibility that developed around 1968. His artists exhibited expressive personalities that they highlighted in their allegorical, symbolic, expressionistic, and metaphorical works.

Today in the twenty-first century, armies of alienated workers, stuck to computers as they write and correct algorithms from morning till night, are the new Mannerists. The more algorithms they write, the more they discover their own biases and errors, and the more they need to re-write them, aware that Artificial Intelligence is stupid, is mere applied statistics. Digital natives are fascinated by

intellectuals such as Bonito Oliva: dinosaurs who remember so much and can recite an infinite amount of data by heart. These latter-day Mannerists are prone to explore and recombine the past, but at the same time they are restless and no longer sure of themselves, recalling the artists of the early sixteenth century who broke with the self-assuredness of those who invented Renaissance perspective in the fifteenth century. Restless, they exaggerated elements of the past; solitary figures, each for themselves, they created the post-Copernican world of the sixteenth century.

Against the revolutionary ideologies that celebrated collective identities in the 1970s, at the beginning of air travel, globalization, and the embryonic development of the desktop computer (which appeared in our homes around 1984), Bonito Oliva celebrated traditional painting and sculptural techniques used by individual local artists, by those who were in tune with the *genius loci*—the spirits of the place—in the South of the world. These painters, who expressionistically created artworks in a singular way, without the need for conceptual or ideological justification, could appear as the narcissists of our time.

It is therefore interesting to attempt to understand whether Bonito Oliva, who has posed nude for the magazine *Frigidaire* every ten years since 1981, is truly narcissistic and interested in being in the spotlight, or whether this is instead a way of turning the camera toward himself in order to make something else shine all the more: not so much the artist but rather the artwork, the world outside, in a Dionysian and Nietzschean mode that welcomes and celebrates vital energy. What may appear as narcissistic is actually a strategy to keep human intelligence at the highest levels, in a Bergsonian *élan vital* that celebrates the spontaneous and creative morphogenesis of life on the planet.³

The speed of thought and the assertiveness of Bonito Oliva become *calembours* and virtuosités in the face of scholarly arguments, always prevailing through performative and non-descriptive rhetoric. This use of language as a force or gesture is clearly of Wittgensteinian ancestry and recalls—although Bonito Oliva does not seem to have been aware of it—what the linguist J. L. Austin meant by the term *speech acts*,⁴ as well as the way in which another linguist, John Searle, systematized and categorized speech acts into statements, or declarations, or commands, or expressions of one's emotional state, and more.⁵ Bonito Oliva uses assertions to create worlds—therefore his speech acts are neither commands nor expressions of his moods.

The use of sentences as acts capable of making real what does not yet exist is the basis of the work of Artificial Intelligence today, although AI is based on command languages and therefore lies at the antipodes of Bonito Oliva's assertive idiom. Perhaps even more important than in the linguistic field, the assertion is an integral part of the legal world, which has the ability to change the laws through judicial precedent. Bonito Oliva, let us remember, graduated in law at the University of Naples in 1961, with a thesis on "modal legacy," a type of donation that, despite being liberal, is conditioned by the fulfillment of a condition imposed by the donor on the recipient, as when donating a painting to a parish the owner requires that it be exhibited and seen by the faithful. After all, for Bonito Oliva, all art is a modal legacy to the world, a revolutionary method to change it: not with the imposition of new laws but through the commitment that a work of art requires from those who receive it.

One of the statements that Bonito Oliva continues to repeat with greater fervor is that art does not give answers to the world—rather, it asks questions. It is therefore in the path of skepticism, where certainties falter, that he locates himself. Coming of age in the late 1960s, Bonito Oliva witnessed the emergence of behavioral and performance art, where the artist's body itself assumes the

imaginative function of a work of art through its aesthetic performativity. In 1969, he wrote in the magazine *senzamargine*: “The actor-artist in the moment of his action proposes an animation of the body, which is highlighted in external gestures, which become the symptoms of behavior.”⁶

Starting from his training and activity in the field of visual poetry and the linguistic and literary “Neo-avant-gardes” of the late 1960s, in his exhibitions Bonito Oliva has placed into dynamic relation some of the most important artists of the second half of the twentieth century, as well as others who are not particularly “ground-breaking” but who are chosen for an effect of contiguity, or presence in the local context in which Bonito Oliva operated; it was almost as if a judgment of absolute quality were less important than the energy that the invitation to an exhibition could generate.

I met Bonito Oliva for the first time in 1984 or 1985, when I had just started my career as an art critic and, shortly afterwards, as a curator. At that time, the Transavanguardia for which he had fought so hard (Sandro Chia, Francesco Clemente, Enzo Cucchi, Nicola De Maria, and Mimmo Paladino, but also Mimmo Germanà and Ernesto Tatafiore, whom he had led to *Aperto '80*) was the dominant trend, both in Italy and internationally. If only out of a spirit of antagonism, at that moment I was approaching young artists who were rediscovering Arte Povera, moving away from the Transavanguardia; over time, however, also thanks to Bonito Oliva, I rediscovered those expressionist artists. Especially nowadays, with the singularity of the human being on the one hand ideologized in the world of social media and on the other considered obsolete in the face of Artificial Intelligence, the idea that a person paints manually, perhaps using antiquated techniques such as oil painting—slow to dry and therefore ductile for days and days—or uses her hands to manipulate raw clay and other materials, is an immense relief, a verification of our humanity, and this provides a sense of freedom from technique.

Similarly, when Bonito Oliva began to express himself through forms that appeared strongly narcissistic, he embodied a revolutionary and anti-moralist individualism that celebrated the human against technology, just as Friedrich Nietzsche had done a century earlier, amid the modern productivist ideology of the late nineteenth-century Industrial Revolution. The circular time described by the German philosopher, whose notion of “eternal return” expressed in *Untimely Meditations (Thoughts Out Of Season)*, 1873–76, rejected the historicist idea of progress, is placed in the wake of skeptical philosophy, a position very similar to that of Bonito Oliva, who was an avid reader of Nietzsche. However, Nietzsche’s Dionysian vision was shattered on the rock of a total incomprehension on the part of his contemporaries, who did not understand the meaning of his *Übermensch* (Superhuman) concept as a potential force present in each of us, ending up in authoritarian delusions during the Nazi- Fascist regimes between the two world wars. Bonito Oliva tempers his love for Nietzsche with irony, which is a contradictory linguistic act infecting the non-ironic speech act that becomes its vehicle.

Whoever speaks with irony wants the listener to grasp their irony, and therefore opens what is being said to non-verbal, behavioral communication. Typical of Bonito Oliva, this ironic negativity protects communication from the weight that his assertions might imply, opening spaces of lightness that avoid conflict and narcissism.

According to Freud, narcissism is linked to the inversion of the libidinal impulse, no longer oriented toward the outside but toward oneself, the “libido of the ego.”⁷ Falling in love with one’s own body image was for Freud a necessary step in the development from autoeroticism to the desire for the

external libidinal object; but its persistence in adulthood could become a form of regressive perversion. Or it can be a normal libidinal complement of the drive for self-preservation. Regarding children, Freud wrote that they could overestimate the power of their psychic desires and acts and have faith in the magical virtue of their words. Love arises from the ego's ability to erotically satisfy certain originally narcissistic instincts that are then transferred to other objects, which thus become sources of pleasure in an effort to reach the primary experience of the subject's union with the world, i.e. the mother. This is the part of Freud (and not the Freud of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* of 1920, in which he explains the death instinct caused by libidinal investment in oneself leading to self-annihilation) that the scholar Norman O. Brown developed in 1959 in *Life Against Death*, a book that greatly influenced Bonito Oliva's generation (it was translated in 1964 into Italian), in which he compares Freud and Baruch Spinoza and identifies and analyzes human happiness as a form of adherence to the pleasure principle and the rejection of the soul/body dualism. On Spinoza, he writes that "His allegiance to the pleasure principle brings him to recognize the narcissistic, self-enjoying character of human desire, and hence to recognize that human perfection consists in an expansion of the self until it can enjoy the world as it enjoys itself [...]. What Spinoza cannot see, without becoming Freud, is that the endeavor to acquire 'a body which is fitted for many things' is the endeavor to recover the body of infancy."⁸ Not surprisingly, a few pages later, Brown quotes Nietzsche: "Nietzsche's Zarathustra says: 'I love him whose soul is overfull so that he forgets himself, and all things are in him'; and also: 'His word pronounced *selfishness* blessed, the wholesome, healthy selfishness that wells from a powerful soul—from a powerful soul, to which belongs the high body, beautiful, triumphant, refreshing, around which everything becomes a mirror—the supple, persuasive body, the dancer, whose parable and epitome is the self-enjoying soul.'⁹

Seen in this light, Bonito Oliva's world is not a perverse one, where the gaze is turned on itself and everything else is cut off. There is a desire to find the union between one's autoeroticism and the eroticism of union with the mother through play (he often repeats that his mother asked him one day, "What do you want to be when you grow up?"

And he replied: "a child"). It is a world in which he acts and speaks with assertive and magical speech acts that evoke the world and invoke its appearance. His is a narcissism created in order to become a catalyst of the world. We are thus very far from the narcissism of our era of selfies and social media, which recalls an eternal version of the Lacanian mirror stage,¹⁰ a child trapped looking at himself in the mirror. In our era of absolute surveillance and satellites linked to tracking software, the entire society is poised to reach the absolute Panopticon—a technological institution of supreme control achieved through the interaction of mutual surveillance systems, each of us controlling and watching the other watching ourselves. If Bonito Oliva speaks in very long sentences, staring at one person at a time with an intense gaze while he speaks, if he acts histrionically in public, it is not to look at himself, but because others look at him, paint him, portray him. His house is filled with portraits that photographers, painters, and sculptors have made of him. Here he has found a process whereby a form of wholesome, healthy egoism catalyzes and gives birth to works of art.¹¹ Bonito Oliva is basically creating a form of modal legacy of himself. The condition—the mode—of the gift or legacy is the disappearance of the artist and of the critic-curator himself, so that the presence of the artwork rises beyond historical time, beyond the here and now, liberated from the artist by way of the critic-curator. When the art critic Bonito Oliva explains an artwork in speech or in written texts, or when the curator Bonito Oliva installs an artwork in relation to a specific space and to other works in one of his group exhibitions, he liberates the artwork by transferring it into the history of art: the artwork becomes autonomous,

paradoxically, thanks to the passport that he, the art critic no longer present, has provided for it in his critical essay or exhibition.

Bonito Oliva's first critical text is found in a notebook now held in our museum's Research Institute. Handwritten, it is titled "Io" and was written in the first person for an artist friend, perhaps at the age of 16 or 17. Here he expresses his sadness for not having become a successful artist. Thus, in this early key writing, the art critic and the artist both disappear.

They exit the stage, leaving only artworks on the scene.

00:00:09

Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev: Tell me about "Ciao Achille" said on the phone by Harry Styles in GUCCIFEST.

00:00:12

Achille Bonito Oliva: I say "Ciao Harry."

CCB: I've watched it, and see that it is being repeated all over on social media. What does this mean?

ABO: It's a slogan. "Ciao Achille," "Ciao Harry." I speak of art and I say fashion dresses humanity, while art lays it bare.

00:00:53

CCB: Your conversation starts after saying "Ciao Harry."

00:01:01

ABO: And then he asks me about music and I say that music is a massage of the atrophied muscle of collective sensitivity.

00:01:12

CCB: And Harry says that being an artist is bringing into the world something you would like to see that you haven't seen yet.

ABO: He's nice.

00:01:25

CCB: And you are intelligent.

ABO: Thank you very much.

At that point, it was the beginning of December 2020, I stopped recording A.B.O. and I took a picture of him laughing, sitting on the armchair in his Roman studio in Via Giulia, surrounded by books and accompanied by his beloved Toscano cigar.¹²

Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev

Tortona, May 9, 2021

¹ Curated with Caterina Molteni. Apart from Achille Bonito Oliva, participants included: Giorgia Bertolino, Bernard Blistène, Ludovica Carbotta, Alex Cecchetti, Francesca Comisso and Luisa Perlo, Cooking Sections, Irene Dionisio, Liam Gillick, Renato Leotta, Tom McDonough, Michael Rakowitz, Gianluigi Ricuperati, Bianca Roagna, Maria Teresa Roberto, Amelia and Piero Simondo, Alice Visentin, Lori Waxman. See <https://www.castellodirivoli.org/congresso-di-alba>.

² His second book on art, after *Il territorio magico. Comportamenti alternativi dell'arte*, is in fact called *L'ideologia del traditore. Arte, maniera, manierismo* and is an investigation and reassessment of Mannerism. It appeared in 1976 with the Feltrinelli publishing house in Milan.

³ H. Bergson, *L'Évolution créatrice* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1907).

⁴ J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1955).

⁵ J. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

⁶ From “Ipotesi per una animazione dei vivi,” in *senza- margine*, year I, no. 1, Rome, January 1969, pp. 28–30. Shortly thereafter, he published his first book on performative art, *Il territorio magico. Comportamenti alternativi dell’arte* (Florence: Centro Di, 1971).

⁷ S. Freud, *On Narcissism: an Introduction* (1914) and *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety* (1925).

⁸ N. O. Brown, *Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytic Meaning of History* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1959), p. 48.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

¹⁰ J. Lacan, “The Mirror Stage as formative of the function of the I as revealed in psychoanalytic experience,” lecture at the 16th International Congress of Psychoanalysis, Zurich, July 17, 1949, originally published in *Écrits* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1966).

¹¹ In 1988–89 the many portraits of Bonito Oliva were collected in the exhibition *A.B.O. Ritratti di un nome*, held in Florence and Rome.

¹² The image referred to is on the cover of this book.