Clarissa Ricci
Towards a Contemporary Venice Biennale: 
Reassessing the Impact of the 1993 Exhibition

Abstract
This paper argues that *Cardinal Points of Art*, directed by Achille Bonito Oliva has been decisive in the formation of the contemporary Venice Biennale. The 45th Venice Biennale, (1993) was memorable for many reasons: the first exhibition of Chinese painters in Venice, its transnational approach, and because it was the last time the *Aperto* exhibition was shown. Nevertheless, this was a complex and much criticised Biennale whose specific characteristics are also connected to the process of reform that the institution had been undergoing since the 1970s. The analysis of the exhibition starts with the examination of this legacy and continues by questioning Bonito Oliva’s curatorial contribution in order to define the specific features which helped to shape the contemporary Venice Biennale.

Keywords
Venice Biennale, Aperto, 1993, Achille Bonito Oliva, Nomadism, Coexistence, Contemporaneity

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Towards a Contemporary Venice Biennale: Reassessing the Impact of the 1993 Exhibition¹

Clarissa Ricci

Introduction

The format of today’s Venice Biennale is the result of a long intellectual and political negotiation. To understand how it emerged in its current form, as an international platform for contemporary art, it is crucial to reconsider the 1993 Biennale.

The conspicuous but fragmentary studies on the Venice Biennale don’t allow an overall understanding of the 45th Venice Biennale, which has often been analysed in the light of specific episodes but never in its totality.

Mentions of this exhibition are often made when referring to the Chinese exhibitions in Europe in the 1990s, since a large group of young painters exhibited at the Giardini (gardens) that year or because it was the last edition of Aperto, the emergent art section established in 1980 by Harald Szeemann and Achille Bonito Oliva which attracted a lot of interest from the press. More recently the exhibition has been indicated as a reference point by Maria Hlavajova and Simon Sheikh in their Introduction to Former West and has been discussed for its transnational orientation.

New archival findings,² as the documents on the cancelled exhibition of Winds of Art, or the examination of minutes and correspondence has shed light on many important aspects which allow a deeper understanding of this complex exhibition.

This account begins by contextualising the Venice Biennale in order to understand the historical and curatorial frameworks within which it has taken shape. This examination is based on a plethora of archival findings which define the scenario in which the innovations and propositions of 1993 were made. The second part of the paper analyses the curatorial contribution of the Director of the Visual Art Department, Achille Bonito Oliva, and evaluates his role in transforming the Biennale.

¹ This paper relies on the archival research conducted for the author’s PhD thesis and broadens its scope, investigating a specific edition of the Biennale which was part of the transformation of the institution from a proto-fair type format into a contemporary platform for the arts. This latter research was assisted by a Getty/ACLS Postdoctoral Fellowship in the History of Art from the American Council of Learned Societies, generously supported by the Getty Foundation.

² Archival research was conducted at the Biennale’s Historical Archive (ASAC). All the abbreviations used in the footnotes are listed at the end of the paper.
After investigating the reception of the 45th exhibition, the final part of the paper outlines what elements of the 1993 exhibition contributed to the remodelling of the Biennale into a contemporary art platform.

1. Reforming the Biennale

Founded in 1895, a year before Pittsburgh’s Carnegie International, the Venice Biennale is the longest running biennial in the world. Over the next 120 years, it transformed from a proto-fair into a contemporary art platform, and there are specific historical moments which can be used to mark its continuous, but inconstant, endeavours to adapt and rejuvenate.

In the period following the Second World War, the student protest in 1968 was the most notable moment. When the Biennale opened in June that year, artists covered their works. Meanwhile, outside the Giardini, students were clashing with the police. However, the tumultuous events of 1968 were also backed by the Biennale staff and local politicians, and led to the first major reform since Fascism. This reform forced the institution to reflect on its role and democratised its governance, but it was an “unfinished revolution” because it failed to free the Biennale from political interference.

The second main transformation of the institution took place in the 1990s, during a significant political and economic crisis that shook the whole of Italy and that forced the Biennale to accelerate the reforms which had been left incomplete since the 1970s. The devaluation of the Lira in 1992 caused the temporary withdrawal of Italy from the European Monetary System (EMS). The consequences of increased taxation, together with policies to curb public spending, was accompanied by corruption scandals known as “Tangentopoli” (Bribesville), and together this caused the First Italian Republic to collapse. While this epochal shift was occurring, the Biennale was losing its international impact. Its national pavilions were viewed by some as anachronistic and visitor numbers had dropped...
to 100,000. Reform became essential to secure the Biennale’s future. The closure of the 44th Venice Biennale of 1990, directed by Giovanni Carandente, coincided with the end of the mandate of the fourth board of directors (1987-1991). Nevertheless, the political crisis made it impossible for the Italian Government to make new nominees. The board continued to operate throughout the first half of 1992 on a deferred basis. In this situation, renovating the institution by 1995, its centenary, became the main goal. In order to provide enough time for this, the exhibition was shifted from 1992 to 1993. On May 22, 1992, just before the board’s deferral year expired, Achille Bonito Oliva was nominated, though not without disagreement, Artistic Director of the Visual Art Department. Although he was given only a short time to conceive the exhibition, Bonito Oliva made a tremendous effort to make it grand, both in terms of size and relevance. He thought and behaved as if the 1993 Venice Biennale was the first step in a larger project that would usher in a new era with the 1995 centennial anniversary. Because directorial appointments were for four years, he thought he would be working on this too.

The first project presentation of the 45th Biennale Punti Cardinalli dell’Arte (The Cardinal Points of Art) was made to the board on June 26, 1992. Bonito Oliva proposed an exhibition that would revolve around two goals: making the Biennale a permanent artistic and cultural laboratory, and strengthening its relationship with Venice:

We need to conquer a permanent activity, in order to guarantee a continuous relationship between the Biennale and the city.

The tone was bold, but the board was enthusiastic. As a matter of fact, none of his proposals were new. The statement above can be understood only in relation to the history of the Biennale’s postwar reformation process.

When the Biennale re-started after the Second World War in 1948, it was evident that the institution needed a different organizational structure to guarantee it the cultural autonomy it lacked during the Fascist Regime. Alongside governmental planning, the temporary commissions in charge of the Biennale in

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11 In 1988 visitors were 90,125; in 1990 125,000. Enzo Di Martino, La Biennale di Venezia: 1985-1995. Cento anni di Arte e cultura (Milan: Bruno Mondadori, 1995), 86.

12 The 4th Venice Biennale Board of Directors was formed by: President: Paolo Portoghesi; Vice President: Ugo Bergamo; General Secretary: Raffaello Martelli; Advisors: Ulderico Bernardi, Ludina Barzini, Gianni Borgna, Luca Borgomeo, Paolo Ceccarelli, Enzo Cucchielli, Umberto Curi, Ottaviano Del Turco, Sandro Fontana, Fabrizia Gressani Sanna, Bruno Marchetti, Stefania Mason Rinaldi, Luigi Mazzella, Gianluigi Rondi, Giorgio Sala, Augusto Salvadori, Dario Ventimiglia.


14 A commission to write the reform was created. Cf. Draft law, Folder “President”, XIV Board of Directors Meeting (October 29, 1993) in La Biennale di Venezia - ASAC, FS, dep, b. 127: 1.

15 The result of the first day of discussions (Minutes LVIII of the Board of Directors Meeting, May 4, 1992, La Biennale di Venezia - ASAC, FS, dep, b. 112) was a head-to-head between Germano Celant (7) and Achille Bonito Oliva (6). In the following meeting it was clear that Celant for bureaucratic reasons could not be nominated, thus, in the third vote Bonito Oliva was nominated director of the Visual Art Department with 10 votes out of 12. Minutes LX Board of Directors Meeting (May 22, 1992), La Biennale di Venezia - ASAC, FS, dep, b. 112.

16 Since the 1973 reforms, most Artistic Directors were appointed for four years. During the 1980s this tradition continued, i.e. Maurizio Calvesi was director of the Visual Art Department in 1984 and 1986, and Giovanni Carandente in 1988 and 1990.

17 Minutes LX Board of Directors Meeting (June 26, 1992), in La Biennale di Venezia, ASAC, FS, dep, b. 113: 26-66.

18 Ibid., 27.

the immediate aftermath of the war attempted to fine-tune the exhibition’s cultural goals. For the first postwar biennials, Rodolfo Pallucchini, Director of the Visual Art Department from 1948 to 1956, looked to those original “Biennale principles” that inspired the founding committee in 1893. Returning to these guidelines helped to dissociate the institution from its Fascist legacy while also giving it a framework within which a new statute could be developed.

The questions surrounding the Biennale’s role were made even more pressing as new biennials were starting to develop, making increased competition a real concern. During the conference to promote a new statute in 1957, art historian Sergio Bettini warned his colleagues that “Venice could be overtaken by concurrent similar national and international exhibitions, e.g. Menton, Madrid and São Paolo”. Competition was made even greater in the 1970s when the quinquennial exhibition documenta, founded in Kassel in 1955, started to gain greater relevance as a platform for contemporary art.

Regardless, it was only in 1973 that major reform was made. The first article of the new charter declared the Biennale’s mission as offering “documentation, research and experimentation” by promoting “permanent activities” such as events, exhibitions, conferences and publications. The Biennale was imagined to be a place of constant and continuous cultural production in which all of its sections (music, theatre, cinema, visual art, permanent activities) were superintended by the Historical Archive (ASAC).

During the first decade after the reform, this goal was attempted several times but never really fulfilled. As late as the 1987-1991 Piano Quadriennale (Quadrennial Plan) – the cultural programme of each mandate – the board members declared that, in continuity with the previous plan, they aimed to accomplish the goals expressed in Article 1 of the charter by improving the permanent activities section. If this showed the resilience of the Biennale’s attempts to accomplish its reforms, it also demonstrated that they were failing to get anything done.

The Italian critic and curator Bonito Oliva had several assignments at the Biennale between 1978 and 1990, most notably as curator, together with Harald Szeemann, of the first Aperto exhibition in 1980, and he was very familiar with the board’s main concerns. Therefore, in accordance with the Biennale’s project of becoming a place for permanent cultural production (in Bonito Oliva’s terms “conquering for the Biennale the everyday”), the curator started the Biennale’s

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23 article 1. [...] it is a democratically organized cultural institute and its object is the promotion of permanent activities and the organisation of international events relating to documentation, information, criticism, research and experimentation in the fields of the arts, whereby full freedom of ideas and forms of expression is guaranteed [...], Law No. 438 of July 26, 1973. New regulations of the autonomous body “la Biennale di Venezia” in Archivio storico delle arti contemporanee, Annuario 1974 Eventi 1975, 31.
24 The Historical Archive of Contemporary Art existed since 1928.
26 “3.2. Le attività permanenti” in Ibid., 7-8.
27 In 1978 Achille Bonito Oliva was commissioner of the Italian section; in 1980 he was part of an advisory committee of the Biennale; in 1990 he curated a collateral event on Fluxus (see footnote 85).
28 Minutes LX Board of Directors Meeting (June 26, 1992): 27.
activities in the winter of 1992, long before the exhibition’s opening date, which was usually in June. The first event to be launched was an educational project; a school for curators in partnership with the École du Magasin, the first of its kind to be opened in Europe. This was followed by the Production, Circulation and Conservation of Artworks, a conference held at Fondazione Cini (December 11-12, 1992) which gathered museum directors and curators from all over the world and helped to attract the attention of the press in order to validate Bonito Oliva’s directorship. Seeking to demonstrate the international reach of the Biennale, Bonito Oliva himself travelled to all corners of the world to promote the exhibition and nominated international personalities to serve in the advisory committee, including Richard Koshalek, Krud Jensen and Dieter Honnisch. The conference and the school for curators were part of a larger educational project that was meant to be the backbone of the Biennale’s permanent activities. The initial project, which was only partially realised, also comprised events and shows throughout the exhibition’s duration.

Because they were powered by the intellectual and managerial energies of Venetian entrepreneurs, the permanent activities were also Bonito Oliva’s key tool in reinforcing the relationship with the city and in reconnecting the Biennale with its foundations. This re-connection was driven by the cultural politics of decentralisation in Italy in the 1970s and, in practical terms, meant that the exhibition was extended out of the Giardini. Often artworks occupied squares and streets, e.g. Sculture nella città (Sculptures in the city) and special projects were organised to revitalise abandoned buildings, e.g. the rehabilitation of the “Saloni” (Zattere and Magazine del Sale).

However, the rhetoric of rebuilding relationships with Venice was also part of an attempt to solve the practical problems with the Biennale’s venues. There were no longer enough buildings to accommodate the scale of the exhibition, and the existing structures were in a bad condition. By the 1960s the Giardini had filled up and a heritage law made it impossible to build new pavilions. At the same time, artistic programming was increasingly taking place out of the Giardini, in particular with the Sculture nella città (1972) which was displayed both in the Palazzo Ducale’s courtyard and in the main Venetian squares.

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29 The International Curatorial Programme of École du Magasin, Grenoble, was founded in 1987. It is the first school of this kind in Europe, anticipating the MA Contemporary Curating Art course at the Royal College of Art (RCA), London in 1992 and Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, which was founded in 1990 as a research center and offered courses from 1994. The agreement of a joint programme of École du Magasin with the Biennale throughout the 1992-1993 academic year was formalised on November 15, 1992 (La Biennale di Venezia, ASAC, FS, dep., b. 115). Part of the curatorial program, directed by Adelina von Fürstenberg, was the participation of the students during the installation phase.

30 Draft Programme in La Biennale di Venezia, ASAC, FS, AVEB, b. 521/2.


32 The Advisory Committee (Comitato Consultivo) was formed by Richard Koshalek (Museum of Contemporary Art, Moca, Los Angeles), Krud Jensen (Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebæk), Dieter Honnish (Neue National Galerie, Berlin), Tommaso Trini (Italian art historian) and Mimmo Rotella (artist), in Minutes LX Board of Directors Meeting (June 26, 1992): 33-35.

33 Achille Bonito Oliva’s first draft programme, Minutes LX Board of Directors Meeting (June 26, 1992): 31.


35 Sculture nella città (1972) was displayed both in the Palazzo Ducale’s courtyard and in the main Venetian squares.


time, the number of national pavilions continued to grow, cramping the Central Pavilion which hosted exhibitions of pavilion-less countries.\textsuperscript{39} Bonito Oliva also attempted to tackle this problem by giving the board a large list of possible venues in Venice for his numerous exhibitions.\textsuperscript{40}

In sum, the exhibition that Bonito Oliva proposed would incarnate a reformed Biennale. His presentation programme therefore gained the board’s immediate consensus.\textsuperscript{41} At last it seemed possible to act on what for a long time had gone unheeded.

2. The Curatorial Contribution of Achille Bonito Oliva

Achille Bonito Oliva’s main goal was to reinstate the Venice Biennale as an international cultural guide, a role which in those years seemed lost. This ambitious scope was already implicit in the exhibition’s title, \textit{Cardinal Points of Art}, which cast the Biennale as a kind of compass for contemporary culture. Bonito Oliva’s mega project, formed of many and large sub-exhibitions, exceeded the budget of the Biennale,\textsuperscript{42} and, despite the fact that he was looking for sponsorships until the very last moment,\textsuperscript{43} some parts of it were never realised. In fact, the exhibition that most closely corresponded with his concept was among those that were eventually cancelled: \textit{Winds of Art}.\textsuperscript{44} Organised together with the committee, and in particular with Italian art historian and commissioner Tommaso Trini, this show was planned to be split between the Central Pavilion at the Giardini and the Palazzo Ducale, and brought together artists of diverse eras and nationalities, from Eugène Delacroix to Anish Kapoor.\textsuperscript{45} The display was not meant to follow a chronological order but was organised around parallel strands named after winds, for example “tornado” and “trade winds”. This manner of organisation privileged complexity and curatorial choice over the presentation of artistic development. The central ideas of the exhibition – exchange both between and within cultures, and the migration of themes, styles and media over time and space – would be left implicit, unexplained by catalogue texts or wall panels. Similarly, the artworks were meant to be exhibited without captions in order to encourage each visitor to have a more direct experience of the artworks. This approach was sparked by the idea that it is not possible to tie art to a single theme: an exhibition can only follow or replicate maps and routes

\textsuperscript{39} National exhibitions were organized since the beginning of the Biennale, and called International Rooms. After 1907 these exhibitions, which were managed directly by the nations, moved into dedicated pavilions. After the Second World War, due to increased requests of spaces, those countries without a pavilion were hosted in the central exhibition venue at the Giardini. Cf. Clarissa Ricci, conference paper, for “The Politics of Display: Collateral Events and Pavilions at the Venice Biennale” (24 November 2017), University of Saint Andrews, organised by Dr Karen Brown, Kate Keohane, and Dr Catherine Spencer as part of the EU-LAC-MUSEUMS project, run by the Museums, Galleries and Collections Institute. Clarissa Ricci, “From Obsolete to Contemporary: National Pavilions and the Venice Biennale After 1993”, \textit{Journal of Curatorial Studies} (forthcoming) 2020.

\textsuperscript{40} The initial list comprises Magazzini del Sale, Cà Pesaro and Palazzo Fortuny, Chiesa di San Lorenzo, Punta della Dogana, La Misericordia, the former Ospedale Umberto I in Minutes LX Board of Directors Meeting (June 26, 1992): 36-38.

\textsuperscript{41} Minutes LX Board of Directors Meeting (June 26, 1992): 41-44.

\textsuperscript{42} Minutes of the III Meeting of the Board of Directors, (March 19, 1993) in La Biennale di Venezia, ASAC, FS, VMCA, b. 112: 140-170; Deliberation n. 25 (March 20, 1993; Prot. Gen. n. 95) in La Biennale di Venezia, ASAC, FS, DCD. b. reg. 63.

\textsuperscript{43} A month before the opening, Bonito Oliva wrote to the Biennale staff that he managed to find sponsorship for the exhibition \textit{Il Suono Rapido delle cose}. Letter of Achille Bonito Oliva in La Biennale di Venezia, ASAC, FS, AV, b. 524: Deliberation n. 92 (May 13, 1993; Prot. Gen. n. 219), in La Biennale di Venezia, ASAC, FS, DCD, b. reg. 64.

\textsuperscript{44} Folder 4.2.1. “Venti dell’arte”, in La Biennale di Venezia, ASAC, FS, dep., b. 116.

\textsuperscript{45} Draft project “Venti dell’Arte/Winds of Art”, in La Biennale, ASAC, FS, AV, b. 567: 2.
The shift from a chronological approach to a focus on the “links, flows, people, ideas, and patterns that operate over, across, through, beyond, above, under, or in-between politics and societies” follows a methodological and critical commitment that Bonito Oliva had already expressed in exhibitions he curated, above all *Contemporanea*, which was held in an underground park between 1973 and 1974. In the exhibition catalogue, Bonito Oliva wrote against the linear chronology of what he called “linguistic Darwinism”. He inverted the dates (1973-1955) in order to radically express the “inevitable partiality of [the critic’s] selective and discriminatory management of power”. In his project for Venice, instead of looking for “lines of criticism”, he grouped artworks in “winds” emphasising peculiarities like gait, motion, and pace over those of style, media, or the artist’s nationality.

The cancellation of *Winds of Art*, which survived only partially in the exhibition *Points of Art*, was nevertheless fruitful since it allowed the 1993 Venice Biennale to focus on more recent and contemporaneous artistic production. *Cardinal Points of Art* thus became more than a title. It described a Biennale which aimed to interpret the “global complexity of art through many exhibitions which acted as tiles of themes, contexts, personalities of artistic creation”. Using the metaphor of the “mosaic”, Bonito Oliva assembled an event made of fifteen exhibitions each delegated to a group of curators which came together to form a complex picture. Even though the title *Cardinal Points of Art* sounded like a theme, Bonito Oliva emphasised that he wanted to deconstruct the partiality of unitary interpretations. From a practical point of view, the expansion of the Biennale outside the Giardini and into the city of Venice was part of the Biennale’s aim of strengthening relationships with the city. From a curatorial point of view, it represented a rupture with the tradition of organising exhibitions by theme, which had informed the Biennale’s curatorial approach from the 1970s as a way to prevent the exhibition fragmenting.

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46 Draft project “Venti dell’Arte/Winds of Art”, Ibid.


48 *Contemporanea* was organized by Incontri Internazionali d’Arte, directed by Graziella Lonardi Buontempo. The exhibition comprised many events and was divided into ten sections (art, cinema, theatre, architecture, photography, music, dance, artist’s books and records, visual and concrete poetry, counterinformation). Bonito Oliva was curator of the art section. *Contemporanea* (Villa Borghese Car Parking, Rome, November 1973-February 1974), exh. cat. (Florence: Centro Di, 1973).


50 Bonito Oliva, *Contemporanea*, 25. This approach was then theorised by Bonito Oliva shortly after in his main text *L’ideologia del traditore. Arte, maniera, manierismo* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1976) and in *il passo dello strabismo. Sulle Arti* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1977).


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This notion of an exhibition as a mosaic resembles the idea of “archipelago thinking” which Édouard Glissant had started to explore in his Caribbean texts only a few years before and which Bonito Oliva was certainly acquainted with. The fifteen exhibitions could be seen as a collection of islands, connected to each other by the city of Venice. Closer though to a mild situationist approach, the mosaic metaphor was intended to suggest a kind of multiculturalism; the mixing of ethnic groups, languages and cultures within society. In Italy the debate around multiculturalism was introduced at a political level in the late 1980s and it gradually became more relevant as migrants started to land on Italian shores after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. As Bonito Oliva declared,

It is no longer possible to recognise the purity of a national nucleus; instead we must acknowledge the positive contribution of a trans-nationality, of an intertwining of nations capable of producing cultural eclecticism and necessary interracial unity.

Such approach chimed with the core concept of Molteplici Culture (Multiple Cultures) held in May-June 1992 in Rome. This exhibition, to which Bonito Oliva contributed a text which was a draft of the second part of his essay in the Biennale's catalogue, was a model for the 45th Biennale's format, and, in particular, for Aperto ’93, as it delegated parts of the exhibition to other curators, allowing for an openness and complexity of views which was described by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev as “a mosaic of psychological, ethical, moral, economic, political, ethnic subjects.” Similarly, the “multi-mosaic” assembled by Bonito Oliva in Venice stresses continuous movement. The “circular exchange of art culture” becomes, in this Biennale, an operational metaphor, which Bonito Oliva explains using two keywords – coexistence and nomadism. These words are both catalysts of the exhibition’s methodological approach and interpretative tools for understanding contemporary art.

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56 This could be the case, considering Bonito Oliva knew Alighiero Boetti well, and Boetti was an admirer of Glissant. On the importance of Glissant to Boetti: “Édouard Glissant & Hans Ulrich Obrist”, in *100 Notes-100 Thoughts: dOCUMENTA 13* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2012).


64 Ibid., 12.
2.1. The Coexistence of Art

As with many other concepts utilised by Achille Bonito Oliva, “coexistence” has a broad and shifting meaning. Above all, the fifteen exhibitions of the 45th Venice Biennale, together with the national pavilions and the collateral events, are a response to the principle of spatial coexistence.

The idea of artwork from different nations coexisting became a central principle which shaped all the exhibitions. As was typical in the Biennale in those years, the Central Pavilion was devoted to thematic exhibitions organised by the Biennale’s curators, exhibitions of Italian artists and to countries without a pavilion at the Giardini. Bonito Oliva, however, tried to free up space in the Central Pavilion since the countries requesting space were increasing every year. It was with this in mind that Bonito Oliva put forward the “transnational proposal” in which he asked the countries with a built pavilion to host artists from nations without a permanent one.

However, spatial coexistence wasn’t simply the inevitable condition of the Central Pavilion, it was for Bonito Oliva “the choice of spatial and synchronic categories which would help to think of art as an order made of coexistences, and not a clear sequence”. This principle of Cardinal Points of Art was exemplified in the display of the Central Pavilion which hosted, as was customary, the Artistic Director’s exhibition, together with the exhibitions of those countries without pavilions, and the Italian section Opera Italiana. The coexistence of these exhibitions, however, was not paratactic. Artworks and sections were not simply placed alongside each other. An example of this principle was visible at the entrance rotunda of the pavilion, which exhibited Terremoto a palazzo (Earthquake at the palace) (1981) by Joseph Beuys, a dramatic space containing broken glass and heavy trunks, alongside pieces of furniture that survived the 1980 earthquake in Naples. This entrance acted as an opening statement of the curatorial principle of structuring an exhibition through references, connections and proximities. The installation, with an egg perched precariously on trunks supported by drinking glasses, is a representation of the instability of life. Nevertheless, a more positive purport of the capacity of art to console and enrich was created by virtue of the artwork’s belonging also to the adjacent section in Terrae Motus, a project conceived by the gallerist and collector Lucio Amelio following the Naples earthquake. Beuys’ intervention, in fact, was part of both Points of Art and Opera Italiana which also corresponded to the pavilion’s exit, recalling even more the ideas of circularity and synchronicity, which are, for Bonito Oliva, fundamental to the notion of coexistence. Furthermore, at the back of Beuys installation was Les Archives de la Biennale de Venise en 1938 (The Venice Biennale’s archives in 1938) (1993) by Christian Boltanski, which assembled photographic documentation of the Biennale in 1938 including the visit of Adolf Hitler; this proximity emphatically marked a new era for the Biennale which was definitely overcoming its Fascist past.

The display of Beuys’ work at the beginning of the exhibition also reflects the artist’s significant role in Bonito Oliva’s curatorial thought. Ever since the publication of Territorio Magico in 1971, the German artist was described by Bonito Oliva as a key player in the formation of contemporary art. Thus, the installation acted both as a doorway and as a point of convergence for the many...
 aspects of contemporary art that Bonito Oliva wanted to highlight, in particular the
nomadism – the second of Bonito Oliva’s keywords – which Joseph Beuys embod-
ied. Even if Beuys’ moment of awakening following his encounter with nomad
tribes in Mongolia is more fictional than real,70 he nevertheless advocated the myth
of the artist in search of the “elsewhere”, as a nomad of the world and of meaning
in general.71

In other exhibitions “coexistence” translated more clearly into inter-
disciplinarity. For example, in Slittamenti72, the coexistence of diverse disciplines
allowed the authors to move within wide artistic realms where the writer William
Burroughs and the philosopher Jean Baudrillard could exhibit their paintings,
and the film director Pedro Almodovar could curate an exhibition of his favourite
artworks.73

Although the cross-references were not always successful, every
room and every exhibition in Bonito Oliva’s Biennale was sparked by the logic of
connections. The ‘points’ of art can be read as junctions between the artworks,
different media, exhibition sections, people and situations in time which make art
possible.

Through the fifteen exhibitions, “the coexistence of art” became not
only a curatorial practice but also a principle of enquiry which aimed to grasp art’s
capacity to trespass, to move from one terrain to another, to blur different lan-
guages and to allow the different sections of an exhibition to interact in a common
cultural discourse. For this reason, part of the mosaic-exhibition was also the
catalogue which collected an unprecedented number of essays by philosophers and
theoreticians who introduced each exhibition.74

This same rationale of coexistence informed Aperto ’93 at the
Corderie of the Arsenale. Bonito Oliva paid special attention to this exhibition and
wanted to make it the Biennale’s flagship.75 There were certainly personal reasons
behind this. Together with Harald Szeemann he had organized the first Aperto in
1980.76 Following its success, the Biennale transformed it into a section devoted to
young artists. In 1993, however, Bonito Oliva abolished the age limit of thirty five,77
following a trend initiated with the last Paris Biennial (1985) in which he served as
one of the commissioners.78 The aim was both to establish his paternity over the
exhibition, to reinstate its original scope and to make it a “cultural arena”79 devoted

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18, no. 5 (January 1980): 35-43; Peter Nisbet, “Crash Course: Remarks on a Beuys Story”, in Joseph
72 Slittamenti was divided in three venues, see table no. 2. For a more detailed description cf. Ricci, La
73 Bonito Oliva, XLV Esposizione internazionale d’arte (vol. 2), 680-712.
74
Bonito Oliva, Cardinal Points of Art, 10. Bonito Oliva already experimented with the catalogue as
an exhibition site. Cf. Luigia Leonardelli, “Amore mio, ovvero il catalogo come pratica curatoriale”,
75 Minutes of the I Countries Meeting (July 3-4, 1992): 3.
76 Achille Bonito Oliva, “Aperto 80”, in Biennale di Venezia, Visual Art Section 1980 (June 1 - September
in Crocevia Biennale, eds. Francesca Castellani and Eleonora Charans (Milan: Scalaependi Editore, 2017),
280.
77 Aperto ‘80 did not have an age limit of 35 years.
78 The 13th Paris Biennale was organized in the Grande Halle de la Villette by an international curatorial
staff: Georges Boudaille (France), Kasper König (Germany), Alanna Heiss (United States) and Achille
Bonito Oliva (Italy). Nouvelle Biennale de Paris 85 (Paris la Grande Halle de La Villette, October 2 -
XLV International Exhibition of Art The Venice Biennale
Cardinal Points of Art
13 June/10 October 1993

Venues

- **Cardinal Points of Art**
  - Monastero Mechitarista
  - San Lazzaro degli Armeni
- **National Pavilions**
  - Gipsoteca Antonio Canova
  - Possagno (TV)
- **Collateral Events**
  - Campo del Getto
- **Special Events**
  - Cavallino
Table no. 2.1

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**Exhibitions**

**PUNTI DELL’ARTE**

Giardini di Castello, Central Pavilion

**Project:** Achille Bonito Oliva

**Exhibition committee:** Adelina von Fürstenberg, Tommaso Trini, Mario Cogogni, Thierry Ollat.

**Artists:**
- TRANSITI (Parabillia) Ugo Carrega, Martino Oberto

**TRITICI**

Jole De Sanna, Corrado Levi, Demetrio Paparoni, Loredana Parmetesi, Duccio Trombadori.

**Artists:**
- TRANSITI Fulvio Abbate, Viana Conti, Francesco Poli, Vittorio Rubi, Anne-Marie Sauzeau, Aldo Tagliaferri, Angelo Trimarco.

**Exhibition committee:**
- TRANSITI Fabio Mauri, (Lauk’ung Chan), Jeffrey Deitch, Matt Hild, Thomas Locher, Kong Changan (Lauk’ung Chan), Robert Nickas, Rosma Scuteri, Berta Sicel, Matthew Slotover, Benjamin Weil.

**Artists:**

**APERTO 93 - EMERGENCY/EMERGENZ**

Corderle dell'Arsenale

**Project:** Achille Bonito Oliva

**Exhibition committee:**
- Helena Kontova (coordinator), Francesco Bonami, Nicolas Borriara, Antonio D'Lavossa, Jeffrey Deitch, Mike Hubert, Thomas Locher, Kong Changan (Lauk'ung Chan), Robert Nickas, Rosma Scuteri, Berta Sicel, Matthew Slotover, Benjamin Weil.

**Artists:**

**PASSAGGIO A ORIENTE**

Giardini di Castello, Israel and Venice Pavilion

**Exhibition committee:**
- Virginia Baradel, Francesca del Lago, Giacinto di Pietrantonio, Li Xiangtian, Marco Meneguzzo, Roland Sabatier, Kazuo Yamawaki.

**Artists:**

**MURI DI CARTA**

Giardini di Castello, Central Pavilion

**Exhibition committee:**
- Gloria Bianchino, Arturo Carlo Quintavalle.

**Artists:**
Table no. 2.2

**SLITTAMENTI**
Sala Guardi alle Zitelle, Palazzo Fortuny

- Exhibition committee: Luca Massimo Barbero, Chiara Bertolla, Franco Bolelli, Vittoria Coen, Furio Colombo, Gabriella Di Milia, Gabriella Drudi, Corinna Ferrari, Jan Foncé, Enrico Ghezzi, Marco Giusto, Luigi Meneghelli, Heiner Müller, Giovanna Battista Salerno, Fulvio Salvadori, Barbara Tosi, Giorgio Verzotti, Marisa Volpi.

**FIGURABILE:**
FRANCIS BACON
Museo Correr

- Exhibition committee: David Sylvester (director), Gilles Deleuze, David Mallor, Daniela Palazzoli, Lorenzo Trucchi.
- Artist: Francis Bacon.

**FRATELLI.**
FRANCESCO LO SAVIO
ET TANO FESTA
Museo di Ca’ Pesaro

- Exhibition committee: Maurizio Fagiolo dell’Arco (supervisor), Francesca Alfano Miglietti, Massimo Carboni.
- Artists: Tano Festa and Francesco Lo Savio.

**IL SUONO RAPIDO**
DELL'ARTE
CAGE AND COMPANY
Granai delle Zitelle, Guggenheim Foundation

- Exhibition committee: Alanna Heiss (supervisor), Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, Ludovico Pratesi, Angela Vettese.
- Artists: Gianfranco Baruchello, John Cage, Giuseppe Chiari, Lucio Fontana, Sassetta, Daniele Lombardi, Sergio Lombardo, Renato Mambor, Piero Manzoni, Walter Marchetti, Michelangelo Pistocchetto, Luigi Russolo, Gianni Emilio Simonetti.

**MACCHINE DELLA PACE**
Giardini di Castello, Ex-Jugoslavia Pavilion

- Exhibition committee: Laura Cherubini, Paola Ugolini.
- Artists: Mario Ceroli, Tony Cragg, Shirazeh Houshiary, Ange Leccia, Roman Opalka, Julian Opie, Panamarenko.

**LA COESISTENZA DELL’ARTE**
Ex vetrerie San Marco

- Exhibition committee: Lòrànd Hegyi (director), Paolo Balmas, Danilo Eccher, Luisa Somaini, Biljana Tomic.
- Artists: Thierry de Cordier, Joan Fontcuberta, Julia Hacks, Renzo Piano, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Marco Bagnoli, Bizhan Bassiri, Nicola De Maria, Günther Förster, Isabella Grenchen, Rodney Graham, Bertrand Lavier, Mario Merz, Marisa Merz, Reinhard Mucha, Mimmo Paladino, Giulio Paolini, Alfredo Pirri, Michelangelo Pistocchetto, Thomas Schütte, Susana Solano, Ettore Spalletti, Haim Steinbach, Franz West.

**VIAGGI VERSO CITERA. ARTE E POESIA**
Ca’ Vendramin Calergi

- Exhibition committee: Francesca Pasini, Giuliana Setari.
- Artists: Marco Bagnoli, Bizhan Basaric, Nicola De Maria, Günther Förster, Isabella Grenchen, Rodney Graham, Bertrand Lavier, Mario Merz, Marisa Merz, Reinhard Mucha, Maria Degenhardt, Riccardo De Marchi, Elisabetta Di Maggio, Marco Ferraris, Michelangelo Pistoletto, Thomas Schütte, Susana Solano, Ettore Spalletti, Haim Steinbach, Franz West.

**DETERRITORIALE**
Fondazione Bevilacqua La Masa

- Exhibition committee: Michele Anzenton, Gianluca Balocco, Maria Bernardone, Daniele Bianchi, Cristian Bichotte, Constantino Ciervo, Luca Ciabot, Giuliano Dal Molin, Maria Degenhardt, Riccardo De Marchi, Elisabetta Di Maggio, Marco Ferraris, Michelangelo Pistoletto, Thomas Schütte, Susana Solano, Ettore Spalletti, Haim Steinbach, Franz West.

**ART AGAINST AIDS. VENEZIA 93**
Peggy Guggenheim Collection

- Exhibition committee: John Cheim, Diego Cortez, Carmen Gimenez, Klaus Kertess.

**IL CAVALLO DI LEONARDO**
Riva dei Sette Martiri

- Supported by José Luis Brea.
- Artists: Ben Yacober, Yannik Vu.
to the most cutting edge artistic production, with a concentration on contemporary artistic discourse. Helena Kontova was nominated coordinator of the project and other curators were asked to collaborate [Table 2.2]. The result was thirteen exhibitions of ground-breaking art. This collaborative format, which characterised all of the Biennale's exhibitions, was to achieve great success in the following years. Most significantly it was the model for the 2003 Venice Biennale directed by Francesco Bonami, who was part of the Aperto '93 team. In contrast to the spatial cross-referencing of the Central Pavilion, the exhibitions at the Corderie were more distinct. However, the collaborative spirit sparked the whole project.

Coexistence therefore meant not only the spatial coexistence of artworks, viewers, exhibitions within the city, but also the metaphorical reconfiguration of different aesthetics when placed next to each other.

2.2. From nomadism to transnationalism

The artistic coexistence that Bonito Oliva insists upon is connected to another crucial keyword: nomadism, or what he calls the “horizontal movement” of artists. This term is very nuanced and its associations need untangling.

The concept of nomadism was used by the curator in his essays in the 1970s in order to describe avant-garde artistic practice. The word, even if it suggests the peripatetic movements of globalisation, is more closely related to the discourse of post-modernism. In particular the nomad becomes the central figure of contemporary social theory.\textsuperscript{80} Marshall McLuhan, for example, puts forward the concept of the global village in which, thanks to technology, different forms of knowledge contaminate and intertwine with each other.\textsuperscript{81} According to this perspective, history and culture are essentially nomadic.\textsuperscript{82} It is also possible to detect in Bonito Oliva's writing the influence of Deleuze and Guattari. Bonito Oliva specifically picks up the concept elaborated in \textit{Anti-Oedipus} (1972)\textsuperscript{83} and then furthered in a \textit{Thousand Plateaus} (1980).\textsuperscript{84} In these texts the movement of the nomad is described as horizontal, which allows it to resist and also to threaten the verticality of power.\textsuperscript{85} The space in which the nomad moves resists normalisation and is therefore always a ‘de-territorialisation’ (a term which Bonito Oliva borrowed for one of his exhibitions \textit{Deterritoriale}). Nomadism destabilises the hierarchical ordering of bodies and introduces chaotic movements whose patterns are only temporary and sometimes indiscernible. This close link to Deleuze and Guattari makes it clear why Bonito Oliva doesn't shift to the concept of migrant, since the movement of a migrant is from space to space while the movements of the nomad are distributed in an “open space”.\textsuperscript{86}

Even though Bonito Oliva derived the concept of the nomad from

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\textsuperscript{79} Bonito Oliva, \textit{Cardinal Points of Art}, 17.


\textsuperscript{82} Gaetano Chiurazzi, \textit{Il postmoderno. Il pensiero nella società della comunicazione} (Milan: Bruno Mondadori, 2002).


\textsuperscript{85} Tim Cresswell, \textit{On the move}, 50.

\textsuperscript{86} Deleuze and Guattari, \textit{A Thousand Plateaus}, 380.
Deleuze and Guattari, the Italian curator left aside its political implications. It is definitely also influenced by Fluxus’ understanding of the continuously changing nature of the artist’s condition. Fluxus’ international and interdisciplinary community – which Bonito Oliva emphasised in the title of his large 1990 exhibition, *Ubi Fluxus Ibi Motus* (Where is Fluxus There is Movement)*87* – broadened what was considered art and offered a practical example of international artistic nomadism.

It was the exhibition *Passage to the Orient* which embodied in particular the centrality of the concept of nomadism to Bonito Oliva’s practice and, accordingly, he gave it a central position in the Biennale’s display. *Passage to the Orient* greeted the visitor at the entrance of the Giardini with remakes of Gutai installations. *Mizu* (water) and *Akai Mizu* (red water) [fig. 1] by Sadamasa Motonaga, were tied riotously to the columns of the Central Pavilion. The exhibition also comprised works by Russian artists from the 1980s, the French group Lettrism, and the solo exhibitions of Shigeko Kubota, Yoko Ono and Jiro Yoshihara. Thanks to the help of Francesca Dallago, a large area was also dedicated to fourteen young Chinese painters including Fang Lijun, Liu Wei, Xu Bing, Zhang Peili.*88* This peculiar coexistence of diverse groups of artists was guided by the idea that, as Elémire Zolla makes explicit in the catalogue,

> there are no differences, not even marginal, between those who try to express themselves artistically (whatever this term may still denote) here and in India, or China, or Japan [...] the avant-garde movements of this century do not have a nationality. [...] A painting does not reflect the historical movement, [...] it places itself outside history, in the single wholly unified globe.*89*

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*fig. 1* Sadamasa Motonaga, “Mizu” 1956 (part of the exhibition *Passaggio a Oriente*), Giardini di Castello, 45th International Exhibition, The Venice Biennale © 1993 by Heimo Aga

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It was under the influence of the two concepts of nomadism and coexistence that Bonito Oliva proposed to the pavilions’ commissioners that they should “get out” of their narrow frontiers, host artists of other countries, and put forward a trans-national interpretation of the pavilion. Most of the commissioners didn’t react enthusiastically, revealing how keen countries still were to exhibit their works in separate showcases. After the culmination of years of debates around the need to abolish national pavilions, this “transnational” proposal actually gave new life to the principle of national pavilions. As Nam June Paik and Hans Haacke showed through their intervention at the German Pavilion that year, a transnational approach offered the possibility to “develop an alternative model of political structuring on a national level”.

3. Reception of the XLV Biennale

In the conference gathered just after the 1993 exhibition to plan the Biennale’s centennial anniversary, a general dissatisfaction towards Bonito Oliva was expressed. These objections, together with the different orientation of the new board of directors, contributed to Bonito Oliva’s failure to be appointed again as Artistic Director. For the first time the board nominated a foreign director to the Art Department, Jean Clair. This decision, instead of marking a new era, aggravated the obsolescence of the institution. The French curator, who was highly respected in Italy, entered into conflict with the board on the organisation of the exhibition, while the reforms were stalled in Parliament. The Centennial exhibition was well attended but not distinctive. At this impasse, Germano Celant accepted the position of Artistic Director of the following Biennale in 1997. His “miraculous” realisation of an exhibition in six months, however, did not save the institution from being perceived as a lost chance in comparison to documenta X, curated by Catherine David. Moreover, that year the Biennale was competing with a plethora of other biennial type exhibitions: Skulpture Projecte, the second Johannesburg Biennial, and Manifesta in Rotterdam. At the end of 1997, however,
the Biennale’s fortunes changed. The reform draft, which had been blocked at the Italian Parliament for more than four years, became, in only a few weeks, a new charter.\(^\text{100}\) The protagonist of this new phase of the Biennale’s development was its president Paolo Baratta,\(^\text{101}\) who agreed a contract with the Nautical Ministry for the use of a large area of the Arsenale docks.\(^\text{102}\) This achievement was marked by the first Biennale of Harald Szemann in 1999, *dAPERTutto*. Its great success gave the Biennale new credibility and repositioned it among the multitude of competing biennials.\(^\text{103}\)

This particular sequence of events made the 1993 Venice Biennale slip away from memory but other factors have also contributed to this exhibition’s obscurity. Despite the fact that Bonito Oliva had gathered years of thinking at the Biennale and combined it in one of the largest exhibitions in its history, anticipating many features of today’s Venice Biennale, and even if visitor numbers nearly tripled,\(^\text{104}\) its reception was largely negative, especially after the highly critical review by Robert Hughes.\(^\text{105}\) This prevented a mature and sustained consideration of the exhibition’s relevance. The whole event was organized on a low budget and with a short deadline; therefore flaws and disorganisation were inevitably detected by the press and by visitors. One of the main criticisms of the exhibition was the inability of Bonito Oliva to offer a clear curatorial perspective.\(^\text{106}\) The multiculturalism of the exhibition was seen as confused and was deemed to favour survey over analysis.\(^\text{107}\) It was decried as the exhibition of “sex and death”,\(^\text{108}\) particularly because of the works exhibited in *Aperto*, such as the photographic series *La Morgue* (1992) by Andres Serrano, the auto-erotic sculptures of Kiki Smith (*Mother/Child*, 1993), the vagina wall photo (*Immagini di consumo di massa*, 1993) of Oliviero Toscani and Damien Hirst’s cows in formaldehyde (*Mother and Child Divided*, 1993). These works were continually pointed to by the press as examples of excess or incomprehensibility; “a political and cultural despair that the Biennale has never previously exhibited”.\(^\text{109}\)

Objections were also levelled at the size of the exhibition.\(^\text{110}\) It was one of the first examples of the mega-exhibition of the 1990s, comprising many venues scattered across the city. This is now the norm, but the Biennale of 1993 tripled the number of venues compared to the previous exhibition. The number of

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\(^\text{102}\) Folder “Arsenale”, in La Biennale di Venezia, ASAC, FS, CP, PB, b. 13.


\(^\text{104}\) Visitors at the Venice Biennale in 1993 were 270,000, Di Martino, *La Biennale di Venezia: 1985-1995*, 86.


\(^\text{106}\) “Bonito Oliva’s curatorial “method” has been to jumble works together in the Italian pavilion under the title “The Cardinal Points of Art” [...] this biennale is quite incoherent and achieves the near impossible feat of making what still passes for “radical” creation look even weaker than it actually is”, Hughes R, “Incoherence at the Biennale” (1993), 68.


represented countries also rose significantly. Most importantly, African countries like Ivory Coast and Senegal were hosted for the first time. Nevertheless, the persistence of national pavilions was also central to the criticisms, and was challenged by the new biennials. The transnational project wasn’t immediately perceived as ground-breaking, with the exception of the Austrian Pavilion. Largely, Bonito Oliva’s push towards a more global perspective was more attacked than praised. The exhibition was accused of showing an international homogeneity rather than a global complexity: “The trouble is that all the nomads seem to have gone to art school at the same oasis”. This was a critique which the Venice exhibition shared with the 67th Whitney Biennial (1993), to which it was often compared for what Michael Kimmelman called its “political sloganeering and self-indulgent self-expression”. Similar critiques regarding the lack of analysis and clear theme were also levelled at Jan Hoet for his choice not to title documenta IX (1992) and to the second Lyon Biennial (1993) for its failure to consider “the show as a whole”.

If the Lyon Biennale was much smaller than the Venice Biennale, the organisers were no less ambitious, naming their exhibition Et tous ils changent le monde (And They All Do Change the World).

Regardless of criticisms, the 1993 Biennale was never totally forgotten. For example, Frederic Jameson discusses it as an example of a postmodernist biennial. When the 1993 Biennale took place, the exhibition scene was starting to explode. “Biennalisation” was warming up and, indeed, the same topics which informed the 1993 Venice Biennale also emerged in the new exhibitions of the 1990s. Manifesta, for example, also defined its exhibition practice through the concept of nomadism.

Over the last decade, scholars have started to explore the 1993 Venice Biennale because it was the first time Chinese artists were shown in Venice, even if there was no specific Chinese pavilion. This is part of the general increase in attention around Bonito Oliva’s introduction of the concept of transnationality.

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113 Adam Gopnik, "Death in Venice".


117 Hou Hanru, “Bi-biennale…”, 98.


121 Chinese artists were exhibited in *Passage to Orient*, cf. Exhibition list in table no. 2.

4. Reassessing the Impact of the 1993 Exhibition

Assessing the impact of an exhibition is necessarily an open ended task as most of the time exhibitions are also incidental. As archival documentation showed, this was certainly the case. In addition, the analysis of the 1993 Venice Biennale reveals how few of Bonito Oliva's propositions were actually new and how many of them were simply extrapolated from the reforms of the 1970s. This awareness frustrates any interpretation of Achille Bonito Oliva as a heroic champion of contemporaneity.

Nevertheless, he was an incredibly energetic, far-sighted, if narcissistic, curator. Indeed, the references to Bonito Oliva’s previous exhibitions and texts were noted by journalists who argued that this Venice Biennale was an autobiographical exhibition.\(^{123}\) It was certainly the case that many of the exhibition's aspects can be traced to his previous productions. But Bonito Oliva isn’t alone in his curatorial self-consciousness. Biennials, especially large scale events such as Venice, or documenta in Kassel, were and are considered to be an achievement in a curator’s career and often become the testing ground of their thinking.

Nevertheless, the 1993 exhibition wasn’t simply the fulfilment of Bonito Oliva’s past projects, but a positive proposition which was latent in the Biennale’s DNA. The curator’s ability to distil the most important features of the Venice Biennale’s unfinished reformation and to fine tune its cultural discourse on contemporary topics like globalisation (nomadism) and multiculturalism (coexistence) was strategically fundamental for the survival of the Biennale and allowed it to overcome the crisis of the 1990s.

Archival findings have shown that the most prominent contribution of Bonito Oliva’s exhibition was its dynamic attempt at realising the Biennale’s permanent activities, which meant giving the Biennale a wider reach both in terms of spatiality, allowing the exhibition to extend outside the Giardini, and temporality, increasing the exhibition’s duration by nearly a year, making the Biennale an institution of constant interdisciplinary cultural production. Today’s Biennale still markets educational and cultural events, such as the Biennale College, the Historical Archive, and the Ca’ Giustian Conferences, all under the banner of “permanent activities”.

Bonito Oliva was not only hoping to fulfil the reforms of the 1970s. The curator introduced curatorial concepts which rejuvenated the Biennale’s format without disrupting it.

The first was the revision of the concept of the national pavilion.\(^{124}\) From the student protests in 1968 and into the 1990s, critiques on the outdated model of national representation were very strong. With the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union, Europe and the world fundamentally changed, and some of the old national pavilions became politically problematic.\(^{125}\) Despite the fact that only a few pavilions were attuned to the concept, the introduction of “transnationality” transformed the understanding of national representation. The “transnational” being something of a cliché in Italian politics and it wasn’t used often by Bonito Oliva. Rather, it was mostly implied as the practical result of the concepts of “nomadism” and “coexistence”. Nevertheless the term allowed the following exhibitions to adopt a more critical approach to “national representation”. Brief examples\(^{126}\) of this can be seen both in artistic interventions,


\(^{124}\) Ricci, “From Obsolete to Contemporary”.

\(^{125}\) For example in 1993 the former Yugoslavia pavilion was used for a Biennale exhibition Macchine della Pace because no agreement between the countries was made as the war in the Balkans was ongoing.

\(^{126}\) The list is much longer but these are clear examples of how national pavilions have become a means of enquiry around issues of national representation.
for example the works of Santiago Sierra\(^{127}\) and Antoni Muntadas\(^{128}\) for the Spanish Pavilion, in 2003 and 2005 respectively, and in curatorial propositions such as Bice Curiger’s expansion of the concept of pavilions as spaces of negotiation in the “para-pavilions”,\(^{129}\) or the project of the Nordic Pavilion that same year.\(^{130}\)

Moreover, critically addressing “national representation” transformed one of the Biennale’s weakest peculiarities into a point of distinction, guaranteeing differentiation from the growing number of competitors.\(^{131}\) The pavilions allow an ever increasing number of countries to colonise a section of the exhibition in order to show off their work, while collateral events have become a practical way to avoid the political limitations of this format.

However, the main feature of 1993 which contributed to the formation of the Biennale as a contemporary art platform was the move away from the thematic exhibition format. What was thought in the 1970s to give unity to the exhibition was disrupted in favour of an engagement with contemporary reality.\(^{132}\) As with the Whitney Biennial of the same year, this created a difficult reception. Even a proponent of Bonito Oliva’s exhibition asked: “how can one of the best curators that we have [...] assisted by more than 200 people [...] not even manage to make an exhibition whose format is recognisable?”\(^{133}\)

The cancellation of Winds of Art increased the risk that visitors would miss the themes implied by the title “Cardinal Points of Art” and shifted the exhibition’s focus onto the “emergent art” exhibited in Aperto’93. This was a shift that also affected Bonito Oliva’s understanding of the exhibition. If at the beginning his methodological approach made use of expressions such as “mostra zapping” or “mosaic”, towards the end, the term that prevails is “laboratory”.\(^{134}\)

This change is relevant for two reasons. Firstly, it is connected to the history of the Biennale. Since the 1973 reforms, “laboratory” was often used to define the scope of the exhibition or as a synonym of “permanent activities”. In 1975, for example, the institution was called an “international laboratory”.\(^{135}\) And secondly, because the term helps Bonito Oliva to reject the authoritative presentation\(^{136}\) of new content in favour of the attitude of “reframing, capturing, reiterating and documenting”; characteristics of what David Joselit has called the “epistemology of search”.\(^{137}\) Using the term “laboratory”, the exhibition becomes less of what Bonito Oliva described in 1972 as a “magic territory” in which art and viewer enter...


\(^{133}\) Vittorio Fagone, “Fatti, misfatti e lampadine”, *il Messaggero*, July 1, 1993: 19.


\(^{135}\) Annuario 1975, 9-11.


into connection, and more a place “for investigating processes of meaning-making and for understanding wider developments within culture and society.”

The insistence on the exhibition as an active site, where a multiplicity of times, epistemological registers and media exist together in an interconnected and heterogeneous form, was confusing. Nevertheless, the ’93 Biennale consolidated the idea that contemporary biennials should act as means of enquiry into social and political reality. Another major example of this from the decade was 1997’s documenta X which used conferences and catalogue notes in order to make discursiveness and critical thinking pillars of the exhibition.

The ideas embodied in the 45th Venice Biennale were really destined to detonate a decade later. It was one of the first examples of a distinctively contemporary exhibition platform, a term which, in the words of Geoff Cox and Jacob Lund:

refers to the temporal complexity that follows from the coming together in the same cultural space heterogeneous cultural clusters [...] Across different scales, and in different localities.

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**Abbreviations**

- ASAC Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee
- FS Fondo Storico
- dep. deposito
- AV Arti Visive
- b. busta
- AVEB Arti Visive, Esposizioni biennali, mostre storiche e speciali [...]
- VCA Verbali del Consiglio di Amministrazione (poi Consiglio Direttivo)
- VMCA Verbali e altri Materiali del Consiglio di Amministrazione (poi Consiglio Direttivo)
- DCD Deliberazioni del Consiglio Direttivo
- CP Carte Personali
- PB Paolo Baratta
- Prot. Gen Protocollo Generale

**Author’s Biography**

Clarissa Ricci is Adjunct Professor at the Università di Bologna. She was recipient of the Getty/ACLS Postdoctoral Fellow in Art History (2019-2020). Previously, she was entrusted by IUAV University in Venice (2017–2019) with researching the foundation of Arte Fiera and analysing the art market in Italy in the 1970s. She completed her PhD in 2014 with a thesis dedicated to the Venice Biennale displays (1993-2003) at the School of Advanced Studies in Venice (SSAV) at Ca’ Foscari. She was a visiting scholar at Columbia University in New York City (2009-2010). She has written numerous essays and her research interests focus over the History of Exhibition and the formation of the Contemporary Art system of which Starting from Venice: Studies on the Biennale (Et al., 2011) was a starting point. She is co-founder and editor of OBOE: On Biennials and Other Exhibitions.