

INTERVIEW

WITH ACHILLE BONITO OLIVA

ROME, 23 JUNE 2015

Achille Bonito Oliva is a critic of contemporary art and curator of important exhibitions including the 45th edition of the Venice Biennale in 1993 Punti Cardinali dell'Arte (Art's Cardinal Points). In 1997 he coordinated the influential exhibition Minimalia: An Italian Vision in 20th Century Art presented in Venice at the Fondazione Querini Stampalia and then subsequently at MoMA PS1 from 1999–2000. Bonito Oliva's Minimalia was the inspiration for this sale.

On July 23rd 2015, Elisabeth Del Prete, Wright's consulting specialist based in Milan and curator of this exhibition and auction, interviewed the venerable Achille Bonito Oliva.

ELISABETH DEL PRETE: To what does the term *Minimalia* refer?

ACHILLE BONITO OLIVA: I think we must go back a fair ways, perhaps even back to Leonardo who said that art, painting, is a mental thing. And I would add that all Italian art has some root that has evolved in time, which starts from this Neo-Platonic concept in art. Art is a representation of the world of ideas expressed through figure, metaphor, allegory.

I N I T A L I A N M I N I M A L I S M , T H A T
I S I N M I N I M A L I A I N T H E P L U R A L ,
T H E R E I S A L S O A M E D I T E R R A N E A N
S E N S I B I L I T Y W H I C H G E N E R A T E S
A U S E O F G E O M E T R Y W H I C H I S
N O N - L I N E A R B U T C U R V E D . T H E R E I N
L I E S T H E E R O T I C I S M O F I T A L I A N
M I N I M A L I S M . . .

In the Renaissance this concept is expressed in prospective depth of field, in its canons of harmony, proportion and symmetry, and they find a new solution during the Baroque thanks to Mannerism which introduced the practice of citing cultural memory. In the 1500s a fracture occurs inasmuch as, for a time, the artist places no faith in the future because of generally iconoclastic conditions: the discovery of America, Martin Luther who questions the Catholic Church, the Sack of Rome by Charles V, the birth of modern finance. These are historical events that put into question the notion of invention, a concept that lies at the base of all western art, the concept of cultural action, of transformation, of experimentation.

With Mannerism we get this very interesting pause—citation instead of invention. No fetishising of the new, but a cultural memory which recovers languages of the past and re-elaborates them in the present.

All this progresses in Italian art, as we know, until we reach the great moment of the movement of the vanguard which is Futurism. In spite of the deathly embrace of Fascism, over time it shed its ideological and political skin and revealed itself to be a very advanced movement crossing art throughout the world. Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's manifestos are a synthesis of artistic intervention in every field. While Giacomo Balla, I would say, represents a salient moment of an art that has found its equilibrium between French Post-Impressionism and this Italian tradition.

Balla's iridescent compenetrations are, to my mind, very important to the general evolution of abstraction across the world. There is also behind this concept of reduction a very strong spirituality. It's not just Nietzschean vitalistic optimism. We can trace a sort of parallelism between art and science. Think of Antonio Sant'Elia in architecture, think of Anton Giulio

Bagaglia in photography. Evolution in Italian art along this line persists; think of Lucio Fontana, then moving on to Enrico Castellani, Francesco Lo Savio... This is how we can even reach artists who appear to be outsiders, such as two from the Transavanguardia like Francesco Clemente and Mimmo Paladino, right through to reaching younger artists such as Alfredo Pirri.

I believe that this title, *Minimalia*, intends in some way to use the Latin word for its assonance, for its consonance, as a *genius loci*, as a root. But it is also connected to a spirit in international art which has, without a doubt, tapped

a great root in the minimal art from Sol Lewitt to Carl Andre, et cetera. So this was also an attempt to indicate the autonomy of this Italian line. Roberta Smith in her article in *The New York Times*, entitled "Italian Minimalism and much much more" argued that Italian Minimalism is not like American Minimalism which has behind it the aniconic Jewish culture with its taboo against images. In Italian Minimalism, that is in *Minimalia* in the plural, there is also a Mediterranean sensibility which generates a use of geometry which is non-linear but curved. Therein lies the eroticism of Italian Minimalism, therein the articulation of a Minimalism which develops also through forms and materials that do not belong to the intentionally reduced tool-kit of

American Minimalism, which is a traveling, nomadic minimalism. This Mediterranean matrix of *Minimalia* by Italian artists has developed the persistence of a concept which appeared to have been abandoned with post-modernity: having a project. The historical avant-gardes brought with them utopia, the desire, the will to transform the world through form, so they had a project. Postmodernism is the recognition that this is impossible when life becomes merely maintaining the present. Art produces resistance in the present, and so in *Minimalia* I emphasize a value, that of a soft project, that is, overcoming the overly proud projects of the historical avant-garde while recognizing a moral value to the resistance of forms of art confronting the chaos surrounding us. So this soft project brings back a utopian movement of a work of art toward another place, a non-place, utopia, *utopos*, within the perimeter of a language which is capable of allowing the public, by reading the work and its contemplation, to retrace and develop new processes for acquiring knowledge.

E D P : Your collaboration with MoMA PS1 in New York occurred after your exhibition in Venice in 1997.

A B O : Leo Castelli and Ileana Sonnabend came to see the Venice show which they found very exhilarating. Some already knew Italian art very well and in *Minimalia* they found confirmation of this history. My great friend Alanna Heiss, director of PS1 also came to see the exhibition. She, Kasper König and I had put together the '85 Paris Biennial. A great relationship built on exchanges, friendship, conversation and dialogue grew out of it. She liked the show very much and she asked to bring it to the States. By coincidence, even on a symbolic level, this show brought to a close the last century of contemporary art in New York.

E D P : In the context of an exhibition on Italian Minimalism in the States, a figure like Salvatore Scarpitta emerges as

T H I S P U R S U I T , I N S T E A D , D E V E L O P S
A L O N G A S T O R Y O F A R T W H I C H
B E L O N G S T O A M E N T A L I T Y ,
A C U L T U R E , A C U L T U R A L
A N T H R O P O L O G Y W H I C H I S I T A L I A N .

a key artist, not just because of his Italian-American cultural background, but also because of his direct contact, also through Leo Castelli, with Minimalism.

A B O : Salvatore Scarpitta is an important artist in particular for the steps he has taken from informal art to Minimalism. At first it seems that with his bandages he is trying to protect the painting. Subsequently, he frees painting by placing a greater focus on the art object, arriving at the almost futuristic recovery of the automobile as an art object. I remember that at PS1 I placed one of Scarpitta's automobiles in an heavy-duty elevator. It was interesting to see the car moving vertically instead of horizontally as it would on the road. Placing the work in an elevator created an aesthetic effect that was both surprising and estranging. Salvatore Scarpitta is a major artist who has managed to combine the sensibility for the object that is typically American with the sense of form that is typically Italian.

E D P : In the essay published on the catalogue of the show at MoMA PS1, "*Minimalia* and Minimalism," Arthur Danto came to define *Minimalia* as "Minimalist Marginalia," with reference to the Italian works of art that remain outside of the primary canons of Minimal Art while maintaining a direct dialogue with Minimalist work. Do you agree with this interpretation of *Minimalia*?

A B O : Arthur Danto recognized in my initiative not just the presence of a theoretical autonomy but also an autonomy in the creative language of these artists, this is very important. 'Marginalia' because it developed an appreciation for this art, for an artistic pursuit which does not lie at the heart of the art market—most luxuriant around American Minimalism, if one can speak this way. This pursuit, instead, develops along a story of art which belongs to a mentality, a culture, a cultural anthropology which is Italian.

E D P : Last fall, the US magazine, *October*, published an article on *Vitalità del Negativo nell'arte italiana 1960/70* (The Vitality of the Negative in Italian Art 1960/70) an exhibition you curated in 1970 at Rome's *Palazzo delle Esposizioni* (Exhibition Hall). This was an important show because it marked the beginning of the *Incontri Internazionali dell'Arte* (International Art Meetings) founded by Graziella Lonardi Buontempo. Might one say that, as early as 1970, the *Vitalità del Negativo* show had laid the foundations for the development of the concept of *Minimalia*?

A B O : Without a doubt, because that show already included a number of *Minimalia*'s protagonists, from Castellani to Lo Salvio, from Merz to Mulas, from Scheggi to Gianni Colombo. I also drew from the movements of various groups of artists those who were best suited to represent this notion which has its own complexity. *Vitalità del Negativo* raised in its title the question of creation, of the unhappy conscience of the artist at a particular historical moment marked by protest, and budding

terrorism. There was this hegemony of politics which was reducing artists to "angels of the mimeograph".¹ Whereas, in selecting these artists I avoided groupings and signaled people who were working on the autonomy of art and not on its heteronomy and this title, *Vitalità del Negativo*, was also intended to give proof of the biographic aspect of these artists—a form that is surely present outside of the life of an

artist but which is also a trace of this life. So this show created quite particular effects, especially in its installation and its exhibitivite itinerary insofar as I introduced a notion of exhibitivite writing: because I believe that a critic expresses himself at three levels of writing: in essays in books; in exhibitions in shows in which instead of words there are words placed in space according to an itinerary; and, thirdly, in one's behavioral aspect in which the behavior of the critic shares in participation, in agency, in complementarity, creation and reflection. There is authority in his work and, I would say, even in the selection of artists. One effect of this exhibitivite writing I wish to recall is something which caused scandal: the sequence of spaces lacked an academic chronology. Indeed, when I mounted the *Contemporanea*, again for the *Incontri Internazionali dell'Arte* with Graziella Lonardi Buontempo, in the parking lot of Villa Borghese, the show went from '73 back to 1955, going backwards, because a spectator lives in the present and recovers, as if by remembering them, the earlier works.

The idea was not to take the past for granted and impose it authoritatively, but to help in recovering the past by means of a contemplative and re-acquainting itinerary for a spectator. So all these concepts produced esthetic shock, discussions. Some were okay with this, others scandalized. But, overall, we can say that all this produced not just changes but a revolution in curatorial practice. At that time, the figure of the curator didn't exist. I was the expression of a generation of total critic: I taught at university, I wrote for the press, I was developing new concepts, and realizing exhibitions, I would appear on television and the media, then in the 80s I even showed my nudes on *Frigidaire* [a comic-book magazine], so I was showing a sense of play, another way of overcoming academic cultural conformity. Trying to liberate the figure of a critic from any rhetorical aura. In a like manner, the shows I have done have always had this same capacity to puncture common place approaches.

E D P : In the 1970 show, *Vitalità del Negativo*, you wrote about an infinite horizontal line, of a genuine recovery on the part of artists of a position on the same horizon with respect to the world which, instead, tends to privilege a reality determined by programming coming down from the top of the system. Now, in *Minimalia*, you write about a curved line tied to a Mediterranean cosmopolitan geometry of art. How has this concept of line, from its horizontal disposition in *Vitalità* to its curvature in *Minimalia* developed?

A B O : Consider that we were in 1970 and that this linearity was an attempt to conclude the long march of art to embrace

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W A S A N A T T E M P T T O C O N C L U D E
T H E L O N G M A R C H O F A R T T O
E M B R A C E I T S L I F E .

its life. Body Art is developing then, a whole raft of languages in which linearity or horizontality were precisely attempts to create a short-circuit between art and life.

In '75 I wrote "*L'Ideologia del Traditore*" ("The Ideology of The Traitor,") a modern re-reading of Mannerism which demonstrated just how revolutionary Mannerism was with respect to the Renaissance by introducing the practice of citing, and of how mannerism had introduced the conceptual side of art. Then, two years later, I began to theorize the Transavanguardia which is art in transit, crossing over, in transition, an art of contamination, of stylistic eclecticism, in search of the identity of its creating subject. So, all this being in progress brought to recognition the individuation of a line which had the capacity to recognize the themes of post-modernity and to speak of a curvature which is precisely the sign, a demonstration of every rigidity and of the play between the subjectivity of the artist and the objectivity of the work.

E D P : This in-depth analysis of the line is very interesting, bearing in mind the writing of the Italian critic and art historian Filiberto Menna on *Linea Analitica* which traced an analytic line for modern art starting from Seurat, Cezanne, Duchamp, reaching right up to Kosuth.

A B O : Let's say that whereas Menna's analytic line has origins that include Mondrian and such, which coherently develops

across the research of those artists who work on the analysis of language, I operated from a less circumscribed, more open concept, capable of capturing the analytic aspect but also its synthetic one, and of keeping this together, as I said before, with the theme of artist's identity. *Minimalia* brings together, it seems to me, a family of artists who are not closely related to one another but who in individual ways each bear a personal adventure but who as a body speak a language which belongs to us.

E D P : In *Minimalia* particular attention is devoted to programmed art in its kinetic-visual declinations. The Italian avant-gardes, Gruppo T, Gruppo N, Gruppo Zero just as European ones in Germany, France, and Spain became organized research groups. What does this rapprochement of art with scientific methodologies and with procedures with an analytic character indicate?

A B O : Just as political groups organize themselves where they share a common sentiment, so artists develop cultural communities, this especially in the north of Italy where problems connected to industrialization, to the division of labor, to factories, and to different materials are strongly felt so that there is also much research into materials capable of representing this contemporary condition.

E D P : It is interesting how group terminology has been adopted—a group followed by a letter—almost brings to mind laboratory groups.

A B O : They want to demystify the concept of art. Giulio Carlo Argan is their theoretician. He had written a fundamental book about Bauhaus right at the culmination of a historical moment in which avant-gardes had placed themselves at the service of humanity in a noble fashion, from every point of view. Thus they were reclaiming a model that Argan had developed, pointing out and encouraging in some way, by means of his theory, what these groups, which had already formed themselves and were developing, actually represented. The single letter code, taken up from laboratory practice, overcame the romantic idea of a movement; the movement was summed up in a formula.

E D P : Pittura Analitica is often viewed in relation to American post-Minimalism. The precursors of this language are thought to include Francesco Lo Savio, who had the merit of having developed a language based on the analysis of the structural elements of art, space and light. How much has Lo Savio's analytic research contributed to the development of American Minimalism?

A B O : Let's say that Lo Savio is without a doubt the artist who radicalizes the theme of light, of form, of the passage from painting to sculpture. The analysis of surfaces in a Baroque city such as Rome. So this must in some way be recognized as a revolutionary act in creative solitude which is born from an interior vision of art which is, if I may be allowed the expression, spiritual. Lo Savio then killed himself in 1963, the same year that Yves Klein died, another great artist. It was a year of blight, as they say in the countryside, very heavy, etc. Still we can say that the influence that Lo Savio exercises on American art is apparent in the chronology. It's not that Lo Savio directly influenced American art. Lo Savio anticipated Minimalism. I think that art is universal; I am not a patriotic critic. And naturally Lo Savio himself was influenced by his cultural context, by a history of art which taps into the historical European avant-gardes

Even more heroic, however, was the Pop Art revolution, a great revolution. Pop Art was an Anglo-American phenomenon. Andy Warhol, I think, was the Raphael of the US society of mass consumption; he gave the aura of classics to objects of mass consumption. Then Pop Art invades Europe, in a beneficial sense, while attempts at Pop Art in Italy and elsewhere in Europe were, in my opinion, absolutely inauthentic because there just wasn't this pragmatic flexibility towards what was quotidian. America had experienced a great European artist called Duchamp who in 1912 goes to the States and, as we know, goes to the Armory show where he puts on these great exhibits on the European avant-gardes. American anthropology measured itself with ready-made and achieved an attitude toward these objects without holding any longer any sense of surreal intoxication or displacement. It created a dialogue among equals.

E D P : In 1999 *Minimalia* consolidated US attention toward Italian art. Fifteen years after that show in New York what has changed in the international reception toward Italian art of this period?

A B O : Last fall's issue of *October* also witnessed, I would say, the puritan honesty of American culture which, forty-five years later dedicates 20 pages to a show, *Vitalità del Negativo*, which took place in 1970 in Rome, and develops a re-reading of it. Let us not forget that in between we witnessed the success of Transavanguardia which reached US shores at the beginning of the 80s. This happens also thanks to a cultural honesty that is typical of the American context which is able to assimilate differences, to accept what it cannot produce itself and to recognize its valence and value. Then we come to *Minimalia* without giving scandal, in a harmonious manner following Alanna Heiss's request for MoMA's PS1.

M I N I M A L I A S O U G H T T O S I G N A L
N O T J U S T A C H R O N O L O G I C A L
I T I N E R A R Y B U T A Q U A L I T A T I V E
C O N T E X T O F W O R K S W H I C H H A V E
S T O O D T H E T E S T O F T I M E .

Starting its progression with Balla, *Minimalia* sought to signal not just a chronological itinerary but a qualitative context of works which have stood the test of time. For my part, I pay homage to this honesty which allows you to broaden your horizons and which allows a country like the United States to be so culturally welcoming.

¹ English translation of 'angeli del ciclostile'. This is an Italian saying that refers to the role of women who participated in the student protests in 1968. They were known as 'angeli del ciclostile' because they were often assigned the mere task of distributing flyers during protests and events.