Vitalità del negativo nell’arte italiana 1960/70, an exhibition that occupied the ground floor of the monumental Palazzo delle Esposizioni from November 30, 1970, to January 31, 1971, revived an ideologically loaded site in Rome under the mantle of contemporary art. Curated by Achille Bonito Oliva, it featured thirty-four Italian artists from a wide range of schools and mediums: painters from the Scuola di Piazza del Popolo (the Roman school of Pop); members of the ’60s Milanese group Azimut; kinetic environments by Padua’s Gruppo N and Milan’s Gruppo T; artists from Arte Povera; and other, more idiosyncratic installation artists.

“Rome Like New York,” announced the capital’s official daily, Il Messaggero, quoting the French correspondent of Le Monde, who had claimed in his review that this was the largest exhibition of its type ever to have been organized in Europe.1 “The capital has never hosted a similar event,” wrote the art historian and critic Filiberto Menna in Naples’s Il Mattino in what would turn out to be one of the few positive reviews of the exhibition. And yet even he concluded: “Bonito Oliva does nothing to clarify the theme of his exhibition. He should have elucidated what is, after all, specifically Italian about it. In this regard he failed. We don’t know what critical discourse subtends it.” 2 Another critic wrote, The meaning of “the negative in art” remains a mystery for the Romans, who began to speculate after seeing posters plastered all over town by November in an unusually ambitious publicity campaign. Some thought it was going to be a photography exhibition in view of the most obvious meaning of “negative.” Some put forward a more sophisticated interpretation: this would be an exhibit of the more irreverent, perverse, satanic side of art. Now that it is visible one needs to register an absolutely peculiar fact: it has managed to arouse the Roman’s curiosity.3

* I would like to thank Kevin Lotery and Claire Grace for inviting me to their conference, and Achille Bonito Oliva and Piero Sartogo for agreeing to be interviewed on this topic. This article is an excerpt from my forthcoming book, Flashbacks and Eclipses in Italian Art of the 1960s.
Achille Bonito Oliva is known in the Anglo-American art world primarily for his later work, as a champion of *transavanguardia* and as a protagonist of ’80s postmodernism. With *Vitalità*, Bonito Oliva, active until then as a poet and critic, was trying out what he would later call his *scrittura espositiva*: “I have always thought that the critic should practice not only an essayistic writing but also an ‘exhibitional writing,’ that is, a way of laying out the critical thinking through an exhibition, in scale with architecture and the social body.” ⁴ Partly sponsored by the private Incontri Internazionali d’Arte—a controversial novelty in Italy, where culture was very much an affair of the state—*Vitalità* thus introduced Bonito Oliva to the greater public as an independent protagonist of contemporary art who saw his role as one of auteur-curator.⁵ The role of his collaborator, the architect Piero Sartogo, was also recast:


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⁴ Interview with the author, Rome, May 27, 2013.
Sartogo consistently avoided the term *allestimento*—commonly used to describe an architect’s work as exhibition designer—to describe his contribution. He insisted instead on calling it *coordinamento dell’immagine*, thus projecting himself as a strong-minded interpreter of what he called “an exhibition’s thesis.”

*Vitalità* took place at a particularly unstable political juncture. The *secondo biennio rosso*—the red or revolutionary years of 1968–69—was giving way to the *autunno caldo*, or hot autumn, a radicalization of the student and worker movements. Confrontation between protesters and the police became increasingly violent. When a bombing in Milan’s Piazza Fontana killed seventeen people and injured eighty-eight on December 12, 1969, Italy fell into a decade of turmoil. The bombing, at first attributed to anarchists, was eventually exposed as a neofascist plot with connections to the upper echelons of the Christian Democrat government. From that point onward the neofascists applied a “strategia della tensione,” generating fear, propaganda, and disinformation, to convince the public that order had to be restored, by force if necessary. Two violent events bracketed the exhibition itself: On December 7, 1970, one week after *Vitalità*’s opening, and one week before the first anniversary of the Piazza Fontana bombing, members of the neofascist Fronte Nazionale (founded in 1968) staged an abortive coup d’État in Rome known as the *golpe borghese*. And on January 21, 1971, ten days before *Vitalità* closed, firebombs destroyed a number of trucks on the Pirelli tire-testing track in the Lainate neighborhood of Milan, the first action signed by the leftist Red Brigades. This climate of uncertainty was registered by *Vitalità* before one even entered the exhibition by the ambiguous inside/outside dynamic of its building’s façade. While its upbeat banner (and poster) featured a Pop photographic negative of the familiar silhouette of Michelangelo’s *David*, rows of closed-circuit TV monitors at street level lent by the firm Brion Vega showed the visitors walking through the exhibition to the passersby along Via Nazionale, signaling that the outside world was but a sideshow to the rather ominous scenario unfolding inside.

Bonito Oliva’s exhibition should be understood as a turning away from the leftist militant activism of 1968 toward a politically ambiguous reflection on Fascism. At the same time, Bonito Oliva was strategically distancing himself from Arte Povera’s most vocal spokesman, Germano Celant. The latter was conspicu-
ously absent from the roster of Italian critics whose texts from the ’60s were anthologized in the catalogue, and Arte Povera artists played only a minor role in the exhibition. In promoting Arte Povera, especially in the years 1967–68, Celant succeeded in placing Italian postwar art on the international map. Aligned with developments taking place simultaneously in the United States, Germany, the Netherlands, and England, Arte Povera was valued for its process-oriented art and praised for its imperative of dissolving sculpture into performance. Bonito Oliva professed different views. Vitalità purported to be a survey of the past ten years of Italian art, but in his catalogue essay, Bonito Oliva offered his own opaque lucubration on the avant-garde’s failure to collapse art into life in the face of an encroaching capitalist system, and on the promise that art instead might serve as a free zone removed from a “false” world. What remained obscure in the catalogue was clarified in a lecture Bonito Oliva delivered at the Incontri Internazionali d’Arte one year after the exhibition’s closing. In this paper, entitled “La citazione deviata: L’ideologia” (Diverted citation: ideology), Bonito Oliva articulated his preference for an art of representation rather than of presentation (read: Arte Povera), and for artists with “an allegorical impulse” who followed what he called “the way of strabismo”—the Italian word for cross-eyed—by moving laterally and looking sideways and backward rather than forward. What Bonito Oliva achieved in Vitalità was a translation of Italy’s art of the ’60s—Pop, monochrome, kinetic, as well as Arte Povera, movements generally assumed by art historians to be “presentist” in attitude, into his own scenario, a narrative that instead favored two nonlinear forms of temporality: the flashback and the eclipse.

Bonito Oliva’s first move was to counter the cohabitation and cross-pollination of artworks urged by Celant. Arte Povera artists were often presented in a single shared space. In Vitalità, Bonito Oliva insisted instead on giving each artist what he called a “space of concentration” for his or her work. Having to contend with the “obtuse magniloquence” (as one critic put it) of the ornate and grandiose enfilades of the beaux arts Palazzo delle Esposizioni, built by the architect Pio Piacentino in 1883, Sartogo masked the building’s soaring vaults and partitioned its space into a sequence of discrete individual rooms. The layouts of the preparatory floor plans of the exhibition demonstrate that Bonito Oliva aimed, almost systematically, to break down existing artistic movements—and by implication their communitarian

10. The catalogue included an introduction by Lonardi and Palma Buccarelli, and critical essays written in the preceding years by Giulio Carlo Argan, Alberto Boatto, Maurizio Calvesi, Gillo Dorfles, Filiberto Menna, and Cesare Vivaldi, followed by an alphabetical introduction of the artists’ works.
12. See, for example, Conceptual Art, Arte Povera, Land Art, curated by Celant at the Galleria Civica d’Arte Moderna e Contemporanea in Turin, June–July 1970.
13. I would like to thank Luigia Lonardelli for showing me these plans for Vitalità in the Incontri archive recently donated to Rome’s Museo Nazionale delle Arte del XXI Secolo (MAXXI).
activism—by distributing the works in such a way that the viewer was forced to traverse contrasting atmospheres. Visitors were forced to move from installations flooded with blinding light to ones plunged into near darkness, and quite suddenly, in quick succession. In response to the artists’ specifications, some rooms were painted white and others gray, while two were pitch-black.\textsuperscript{14} The dropped ceilings, fabricated with either opaque plastic or with a semi-opaque synthetic fiber, followed a similar color scheme. Among the works installed in the white rooms were Piero Manzoni’s \textit{Achromes}, Giulio Paolini’s identical, mirroring canvases, Alighiero Boetti’s nearly invisible graphite drawings, Mario Merz’s neon sequences of Fibonacci num-


bers, Enrico Castellani’s punctured walls, and Jannis Kounellis’s sound piece, which played at scheduled times on a grand piano in an otherwise empty room. These spaces alternated with rooms lit only by “black” or ultraviolet light. Many of the latter were dedicated to Arte Programmata artists such as Carlo Alfano, who let a drop of water fall with implacable regularity (every eight seconds) from the ceiling of a dimmed room into a shallow basin; Gianni Colombo, whose tiled corridors lit by a strobe light led to a room cut by thin beams of light filtering through the floor; Alberto Biasi, who projected rays of light onto rotating motorized prisms that refracted the rays into pure color; and Arte Povera’s Gilberto Zorio, who sent a tenu-

\textsuperscript{14} A few of the letters from the artists to Sartogo requesting spatial specifications and stating their needs were reproduced in \textit{Roma questa era la nostra avanguardia}. 
ous stream of incandescent light across his room in which, every four minutes, the space would go dark and the word *confine* (frontier) appeared on the facing wall. Then came the three most photographed rooms, assigned by Bonito Oliva to some of his favorite idiosyncratic artists: Paolo Scheggi, Vincenzo Agnetti, and Vettor Pisani. Scheggi presented his twin tombs—the *Della metafisica* (Tomb of metaphysics) (1970), where one entered into a claustrophobic white-painted pyramid, and *Della geometria* (The Tomb of geometry) (1970), a cubicle lined with metal foil. In Agnetti’s *Il deserto con apocalisse* (Desert with apocalypse, 1970) one walked on sand past a dysfunctional calculator abandoned in darkness, with quotes taken from the Book of Revelation inscribed on the adjacent wall. Finally, in Pisani’s room, with *Tavolo caricato a morte* (1970), under the merciless light of powerful projectors, a guinea pig chained to a sliding contraption on an iron table awaited possible death, while a woman in opaque black glasses stood motionless under a ticking clock. The favorite photo-op for popular illustrated magazines was Fabio Mauri’s *La luna* (The moon, 1968): Visitors entered the space through oval openings reminiscent of spaceship hatches and then had to slog through a foot-deep layer of Styrofoam pellets in a dark room that was empty save for the artist’s signature monochrome TV-shaped canvases. One such canvas read, “The end.”
“The strange world of Vitalità del negativo: art that ends up in an amusement park,” ran the headline in Epoca (the Italian counterpart to Life magazine);15 “A salon on the moon: sculptors in competition with astronauts,” reported Bologna’s Il resto del carlino;16 “Magic eye in the Pop labyrinth,” claimed Rome’s Communist daily Paese sera;17 “Step right up, folks, and come inside! Roll in lunar snow! Listen to Verdi! See real paint strokes made by human hand! Op, pop, funk, junk, kinetic, environmental, conceptual—you name it, we have it!” sneered Edith Schloss in the International Herald Tribune.

[Y]ou enter womb-like darkness, which in reality is the high, old-fashioned entrance hall (of a Victorian palace) modernized and lowered with simple devices of lighting and black bands. Then you are lured into cubicles, room after room, halls and narrow corridors, distorted or straight, unbearably bright or pitch dark, sometimes too full or so empty you think the fire extinguisher is an exhibit. . . . It does not mat-

ter that the whole ambitious, disproportionately costly project is glossy and gimmicky, that it is a fun fair that is more fair than fun, that the Roman art world is seething, that some have been unfairly excluded or included; or that the full weight of the establishment is behind the product and that, like Nabucco, they did not heed the writing on the wall. What matters is: it is too late. What is new and different cannot remain new and different. Most things offered here have been done before or elsewhere or by the mass media.\textsuperscript{18}

Most perceptive in understanding that the artists’ works, isolated as they were in separate rooms, were in fact intended to participate in a larger exhibitional matrix was a critic named C.M., who wrote in the pop-music magazine \textit{Ciao 2001}:

\textit{Vitalità} is not about individual works but a whole, reminiscent of a hall of mirrors or, rather, a hall of horrors. What hovers is a disquieting atmosphere, a silent drone broken by the noise of the machines, some of them gratuitous and some not. Judging from the effect on the viewer rather than the curator’s intention, altogether undecipherable, the aim was to return the viewer to a degree zero of visuality by purging him with lights, plastics, stones and metals, black and white, light and colors.\textsuperscript{19}

A choir of other critics lamented that the exhibition had institutionalized what was in fact—\textit{pace} Arte Povera—an already moribund neo-avant-garde: “Exhibition or museum? That which is already dead is passed off as living.”\textsuperscript{20}

“This sumptuous event has an ungainly amount of money at its disposal,” noted the French critic Pierre Restany in his review “\textit{Vitalità del negativo}/Negativo della vitalità” for the Milanese magazine \textit{Domus}, introducing the cliché of shadowy Roman deals struck too close to the sources of political power. In fact, Rome’s art world had no center: No successor to an aging Giulio Carlo Argan (professor at the University of La Sapienza, art critic, and soon to become the first Communist mayor of Rome) had emerged, except for countless chroniclers. The city’s intellectual power vacuum was exposed, in Restany’s view, by this exhibition’s lone attempt to fill it. The cover of the issue of \textit{Domus} carrying Restany’s review featured a Pop photographic negative in the manner of \textit{Vitalità}’s poster of three visitors, one of them a young man in bell-bottom jeans and ribbed sweater cooped up, as if on a bad psychedelic trip, in Scheggi’s pyramidal tomb.\textsuperscript{21}


Similarly snide comments about Roman decadence were voiced in NAC (Notiziario arte contemporanea), another Milanese journal. “With Vitalità,” wrote the critic and art historian Enrico Crispolti,

the avant-garde wants to ingratiate itself to the Roman aristocracy and upper class, to enter their “salons” by creating its own. The consummate proof of this is the spectacular presence of all the top brass from Palma Bucarelli [the director of Rome’s Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Moderna], to Italy’s President Saragat, to the Minister of Education, to the Mayor, all of whom convened on its opening night. The avant-garde is looking for a seat as senator for life. And where, may I ask, did the unlimited funds come from? Another miracle in this miracle-prone (miracolistico) nation of ours! The result of this false protest is an irresponsible and funereal liquidation of any remaining tension in Italy’s avant-garde. This gesture will not be easy to undo.22

A few pages later in the same issue of NAC, Cesare Vivaldi, a critic mostly identified with the Roman school of Pop, wrote, “The ‘negativity of language’ which, according to our friend Achille Bonito Oliva, is the common denominator of the artists exhibited here, suffers from institutionalization. An academicism of horror, of the macabre, just as late informale was the academicism of anguish.” 23

Most interesting in these reviews is the accusation that Bonito Oliva had hijacked Italy’s neo-avant-garde for his own private agenda, that is, for a narrative other than its own. In review after review, Vitalità was cast as the funereal and ostentatious reprise of a series of small, ludic, and sunny manifestations of the avant-garde that had recently taken place on the Italian periphery: works shown in Spazio dell’immagine (curated by Umbro Apollonio in the summer of 1967 in the Gothic Palazzo Trinci in the Umbrian town of Foligno), Arte povera + azioni povere (a three-day event curated by Germano Celant in the old arsenals of Amalfi in the summer of 1968), Al di là della pittura (Beyond painting) (which took place the following summer in a public high school in the Adriatic town of San Benedetto del Tronto), Campo urbano (forty interventions in which Luciano Caramel called upon artists, joined by musicians, architects, art critics, local firemen, electricians, and the public, to take over the northern city of Como for one day in the fall of 1969), and finally Bonito Oliva’s own Amore mio (his first exhibition, creatively improvised in the Renaissance Palazzo Ricci in Montepulciano in the summer of 1970).24

Turning a shortcoming—the glaring absence of a network of museums in Italy committed to promoting contemporary art—into a virtue, artists, curators, collec-

tors, and cultural entrepreneurs occupied, repurposed, and indeed reinvented charming venues, none of which had ever before served for art display.25

Yet in Rome, the same circumstances that had resulted in these exhibitions’ appealing provincial locales led Vitalità into an ideologically toxic building whose historicist façade and grand interiors had already been redesigned several times before, in particular during the 1930s, when exhibitions played a crucial role in the propaganda machine of the Fascist regime. The Palazzo delle Esposizioni was a favorite venue.26 First came the quadriennali, inaugurated in 1931 and to this day presented every four years in that building.27 Then, most spectacularly, came the Mostra della rivoluzione fascista, staged in 1932 to celebrate the tenth anniversary of Mussolini’s March on Rome. On this occasion, the palazzo’s entire façade was camouflaged to function as a backdrop to four giant shimmering metal pilasters in the shape of immense fasci (literally “bundles” or “sheaves”) in the “armored modernism” devised by one of Italy’s most talented Rationalist architects, Adalberto Libera.28 Finally, after the regime had turned away from Rationalist architecture, the Mostra Augustea della romanità of 1937 celebrated the bimillenium of Augustus. This time, the palazzo’s façade was refurbished in stile littorio with the Ur-Roman motif of the triumphal arch by the lesser-known and much less talented architect Alfredo Scalpellì.29 The palazzo emerged from the war in a derelict state and for a time limped along by presenting minor local fare: exhibitions of paintings from the Trentino Alto Adige, paintings by art-school teachers from the Lazio, and Rome’s habitually disappointing quadriennali. It was only with Vitalità that the palazzo regained its cultural standing.30

Recent interviews with Bonito Oliva and Sartogo confirmed that their choice of the palazzo was quite deliberate. To the question “Why there?” Sartogo answered, “Because this was the only renowned space that looked interesting to us and wasn’t a museum of modern art. We also liked the fact that it was derelict, almost unsafe (pericolante), and out of favor, the place assigned [since 1931] to

25. This situation was arguably without parallel in Western Europe and the US, where museums readily accepted a wide variety of experimental work within their walls. These exhibitions in effect forestalled what would soon become the paradigm for exhibitions like Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form in Bern and Op Losse Schroeven in Amsterdam in 1969. Gabriele Guercio and I are writing an essay devoted to the unruly character of these Italian events.


those lackluster *quadriennali.*” We asked, “But you knew, didn’t you, that this was the space used by the Fascists in ’32?” “Of course we knew,” Sartogo answered, “but we didn’t give a damn.”31 And yet, in the climate of political revisionism of the ’70s, when both Rationalist and neoclassicist Fascist architecture was beginning to acquire a renewed glamour through a slew of historiographical studies published in the late ’60s and early ’70s, such nonchalance remains unconvincing.32 The two reviews written by Crispolti and Vivaldi for NAC three days after Vitalità’s closing made the link back to the 1932 Mostra perfectly clear. Crispolti wrote: “Vitalità del negativo is not a problematic exhibition. It is, in fact, axiomatic and in its own way even terroristic (in view of its official status), and one may even call it,

31. Interview with Chiodi and Golan.
if somewhat malignantly, *littorica* [an Italian adjective meaning fascist] (without however wanting to push too far such a noxious comparison with another exhibition that took place, forty years ago, in these very rooms).”

Vivaldi’s review was even more explicit. Titled “Il sacrario del negativo” (The shrine of the negative), it evoked the *Mostra*’s climactic room, the *sacrario dei martiri*, a memorial to fallen soldiers designed by Libera and Antonio Valente, a dark, cryptlike space in which a huge black cross rose from a red-lit floor under a darkened cupola and rested against a striated, backlit wall:

> The atmosphere of many of the rooms echoes, in one of those strangely vengeful moments of history, the infamous *Mostra della rivoluzione fascista* which took place, as it happens, in this very same palazzo. I remember (I was a child) a black hall, with the countless inscriptions, in bronze, of the word “presente!” with psychedelic-patriotic music in the background, of which Scheggi’s room is but a parody; and I remember macabre details, like the wooden bridge stained with the blood of Giovanni Berta (repainted, I am sure, from time to time) which would be the envy of Vettor Pisani. This is no coincidence. The *Mostra* was a shrine; it responded, that is, to the most profound moral calling of the fascists, not to be recognized as killers while they were in fact vultures, and the same is true of *Vitalità del negativo* for the simple reason that negativity, as soon as it is institutionalized, loses all vitality and becomes its own gravedigger.

34.

It was above all at the building’s entrance that *Vitalità* declared itself from the outset a scenographic event of the most spectacular sort by simply having an architect upstage the artists. As Milton Gendel, Rome’s correspondent for *Art News*, perceptively remarked: “The interest of the show is in its sumptuous environments ready to be transposed into a hotel lobby, a nightclub, or San Simeon. The most significant feature of this exhibition is that its main star turns out to be an architect, Sartogo, who designed the setting that stylishly takes in all the displays, which thus become incidents in a larger composition.”

Looking for a way to emblematize Bonito Oliva’s title for the exhibition, which may or may not have alluded, as critics conjectured, to the “negative thought” of Hegel, Schopenhauer, Heidegger, Nietzsche, Adorno, or Marcuse, Sartogo split the palazzo’s rotunda in two, shrouding the cupola in darkness. Upon entering this normally grand, vaulted space, visitors saw their own enlarged silhouettes projected on four large screens at ground level. The signal gesture was Sartogo’s wrapping of the entrance’s Corinthian columns with black ribbon in the form of intersecting X’s

33. Crispolti, “Il salon dell’avanguardia.”

34. Cesare Vivaldi, “Il sacrario del negativo.” Born in 1935, Vivaldi must have been referring to the third restaging of the *Mostra* in Rome’s Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Moderna in 1942 to coincide with the twentieth anniversary of the regime.

hovering just above the visitors’ heads. His use of black bands, which he described with the loaded word *fasci*, and the fact that his intervention was the only one to be photographed for *Vitalità*’s catalogue, where it appeared as a double spread as the parting shot, made the X’s an almost self-explanatory statement of intent. “What emerges from those photographs—I practically theorized the whole affair,” Sartogo said during our interview.36 “To cut that space in two was a way to contain its rhetorical emphasis, to punish it,” said Bonito Oliva.37 “The ribbon looked like duct tape, it had a demystifying Pop touch to it,” Sartogo remarked.38

At the *Mostra* of 1932, the X—year ten of the regime but also a sign that resonated with the omnipresent word *dux* or *duce*, as well as the Christian cross—had been mounted on the inside wall above the entrance, and not only there. At *Vitalità*, metaphorically deposing the Fascist mark, Sartogo rotated the X ninety degrees in space so that it hung horizontally over the entrance hall. In a television report on *Vitalità* made by RAI [Rai Televisione Italiana], the first thing one sees as the camera pans up into the entry space is the giant X formed by the black cloth banners suspended overhead, as if crossing out and negating the dome.39 And yet, might one not say that Bonito Oliva and Sartogo were also recognizing an element of negativity in

36. Interview with the author.
37. Interview with the author.
38. Interview with the author.
Fascism itself? In the ‘32 Mostra, X signaled the Fascists’ reclaiming of Italy’s imperial past. But it also signaled, with a markedly Futurist inflection, a new stage of history by setting the clock back to zero, erasing the nation’s experience with parliamentarian politics from the time of Italy’s unification in 1871 to the March on Rome in 1922. Vitalità’s no was not only a no to Fascism but also to Fascism’s revolutionary dimension, and so perhaps to revolution in general. Central to Bonito Oliva’s thinking at this political juncture was the book Ideologia e linguaggio (Ideology and language), published by the poet and writer Edoardo Sanguineti in 1965, one of the earliest and most lucid reflections on the aestheticization of politics as an aspect of the failure of the historical avant-gardes. Most chillingly pertinent in the 1970 reprint of this book was a 1968 essay in which Sanguineti called attention to how interventismo (militantism) and the marvels of mechanized war became the doctrinal fulcrum of Futurism, crystallizing what had begun as a vaguely anachronistic, vaguely anarchist, vaguely post-symbolist paracrepuscolare (twilight zone) movement into a proper avant-garde. For Sartogo, the key text was one by Umberto Eco, a member of Gruppo 63. Published after he had spent a year teaching in architecture schools, the most politicized wing of Italy’s academia, La struttura assente (The absent structure) would be Eco’s first venture into semiotic theory. Also significant to Bonito Oliva was one of the most controversial books of 1970, Il fascismo: le interpretazioni dei contemporanei (Interpretations of Fascism), written by influential historian Renzo de Felice and published by Laterza, Italy’s most reputable academic press. This was the first non-Marxist—and, to some, problematically revisionist—study of the regime. Stimulated by interpretations of Fascism since 1945 that were Italian and, even more importantly, as de Felice explained, pan-European, it downplayed the role of Italian antifascism, dwelling instead on Fascism’s origins in the 1910s within the ranks of the socialist Left and what its author termed, again and again, “the unquestionably revolutionary nature” of the regime.

Reminiscences of Fascism and architecture converged in one of the most beautiful works in Vitalità, the silvery mural drawings made by Giosetta Fioroni, the only woman among the Roman Pop artists and the only woman artist in Vitalità. While many of the exhibition’s artworks and installations had already been shown before, Fioroni’s was a fragile scenery that was subsequently

40. On the double temporality of the X, and its being at the core of Fascism’s surfeit of signs, images, slogans, books, and buildings, as it sought to compensate for, fill in, and cover up its perpetually unstable ideology, see Schnapp, “Epic Demonstrations.”
41. Originally published in Rome’s new and influential Quindici, a literary journal identified with the poets of Gruppo 63, the essay reflected the internal polemics between the old (i.e., Communist) Left, to which Sanguineti adhered, and the rise of a new, radical, extra-parliamentary Left, leading to the demise of the journal only two years after its founding. Edoardo Sanguineti, “La guerra futurista,” Quindici no. 14 (Milan, December 1968), pp. 35–38; and Ideologia e linguaggio (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1970). See also Luigi Scrivo, ed., Sintesi del futurismo: Storia e documenti (Rome: Bulzoni, 1968), and Walter L. Adamson, “Fascinating Futurism: The Historiographical Politics of an Historical Avant-garde,” Modern Italy 13, no. 1 (February 2008), pp. 68–75.
42. Umberto Eco, La struttura assente (Milan: Bompiani, 1968).
destroyed. The work’s title, Studio per: Stanza dei paesaggi, Villa Valmarana, Vicenza, 17 . . . , made reference to a famous Palladian villa in the Veneto whose guest chambers were decorated in the 1750s by Giambattista and Giandomenico Tiepolo; fittingly, Sartogo left the geometric design of the travertine and dark-gray peperino-marble floor visible. But the stark modernist geometries of Fioroni’s drawings pointed elsewhere. Penciled on one of the drawings was the word autostrada, or highway. Another drawing of the same year was entitled The Road to Fregene. This suggests that what we may be seeing in Fioroni’s drawings, with their long lines receding toward a bleak horizon, are the deserted architectural vistas of EUR. The highway to Fregene, to the beach, runs right by EUR. Envisioned by Mussolini as a “third Rome,” EUR was an ideal city planned for the World Fair of 1942 but left unfinished at the outbreak of World War II and completed only in the ‘50s. EUR became one of the iconic sites of postwar Italian cinema. In Roberto Rossellini’s Rome, Open City (1945) EUR was the setting for partisan resistance. In Antonioni’s Eclipse (1962) it symbolized urban alienation. In Bernardo Bertolucci’s The Conformist (1970), a film that premiered in theatres just as Vitalità was opening, EUR stood for the relentless self-staging of Fascism. A few months earlier, a brochure that accompanied a show of Fioroni’s new work featured as its frontispiece a work entitled Obedience, the silhouette of a young girl giving the Fascist salute. In this brochure, Fioroni (who was born in 1932) mused about images—some of them family photographs from her childhood—that hovered, she said, between private thoughts and present-day society: “faces, clothes,
fashions, and, above all, feelings that circulate—the ghosts of consumption, of a funereal remake [Fioroni’s emphasis] under way around us.” 47 Fioroni’s use of the word remake in English, a term whose cinematic referent is manifest in either language, strikes the note that releases the exhibition from permanent revolution into a more ambiguous temporality.

It was, however, a photographer who captured the eerie atmosphere of Vitalità better than the critics. Mostly known for his coverage of the Venice Biennales, Ugo Mulas had a knack for capturing events as if they were unfolding cinematographically, and he was invited by Graziella Lonardi to shoot the exhibition after it was installed. The two apparently considered producing a photo book and had started looking for a publisher. Because of Mulas’s declining health and his untimely death in 1973, the project was shelved.48 In one of his photographs, we see the palazzo’s neo-Roman coffered ceiling emerging, haunting and remote, through the translucent screen hanging above a painting by the Roman Pop artist Mario Schifano. In another, we find Fioroni standing in front of her deserted wall drawings on the opening night wearing a fur jacket. Her head is slightly thrown back, and something appears to have caught her attention from beyond the frame on the right. Another woman faces the opposite direction, examining something—also invisible to us—in one of Fioroni’s drawings. It is as if we had been transported to a film set. The photos recall the architecturally dramatic scene in The Conformist in which Marcello Clerici, the turncoat antihero of the story, played by Jean-Louis Trintignant, takes his eccentric mother to visit his demented father at an asylum. In that scene, filmed on location at EUR, we see the mother, the son, and a doctor standing starkly silhouetted against the chilling whiteness of a cold marble platform, all facing the same direction. They stare at something in the distance offscreen. Marcello’s mother, like Fioroni, wears fur. In another of Mulas’s photographs, a young couple—the man in a jacket and hat and the woman in a fur coat—appear trapped as they try to walk through a revolving door in the reflec-

48. Although the maquette for the book was lost, the photos have been recently published in book form thanks to the initiative of Giuliano Sergio. See Giuliano Sergio, ed., Ugo Mulas: Vitalità del Negativo (Milan: Johan & Levi, 2010).

tive laminated metal of Scheggi’s *Della geometria*, echoing the scene in *The Conformist* where Marcello accompanies Anna (played by Dominique Sanda)—the mysterious wife of Luca Quardi, an antifascist exile in Paris whom Marcello had been sent to kill—along one of Paris’s most elegant shopping streets.

The oft-noted elegance of *Vitalità* was on a par with that of the stylized camerawork of Vittorio Storaro and the set designs by Ferdinando Scarfiotti for *The Conformist*, characteristics that would become, soon enough, one of the prime marks of the postmodern. Throughout the exhibition—from Davide Boriani and Gabriele De Vecchi’s *Camera distorta* (Distorted room, 1970), to Biasi’s *Movimento contuino di raggi e di colore* (Continuous movement of rays and color, 1967), Colombo’s *Campo praticabile* (Traversable field, 1967), Getulio Alviani’s *Rilievo a riflessione ottagonale* (Relief with orthogonal reflection, 1970), and beyond—the viewer was made to traverse spaces characterized by plunging perspectives, echoing scenes like the one in which we see Clerici from afar nervously pacing up and down Adalberto Libera’s interminable halls in EUR’s Palazzo dei Congressi, waiting for a meeting with a Fascist government official. Most striking is the way the exhibition and the film both relied on the use of light and shadow projected at slanting angles. Asked about this aspect of the film, Bertolucci explained: “*The Conformist* is lighted like a 1930s studio film; even when we were on location, there were a lot of lights and lighting effects. This is the first film where I controlled the lighting myself in the old, truly professional classical sense. You can get unbelievable effects which help the psychology, the narrative, the whole language of the film.”

Sartogo’s bisected entrance space had its counterpart in a crucial episode in Bertolucci’s film, in which Marcello, emerging from a pool of shadow, makes a gesture reminiscent of the Fascist salute during his first encounter with Quadri in his Paris home. In *Ambiente-strutturazione a parametri virtuali* (Environment-structure with virtual parameters) by De Vecchi, a beam of light followed the viewer across the space as if he or she were under police interrogation.

tion, cutting into the body like a blade. The somber atmosphere suffusing Vitalità was made most palpable in Gilberto Zorio’s Boundary (Confine): “A boundary, as the artist explained on many occasions, being an imaginary line that can only be concretized through violence.”

Confine appears in the catalogue next to another work by Zorio where the word Odio (hate) had been hammered into a wall.

To those who may argue that Vitalità fed off the glamorous frisson of Fascism, I would respond that Bonito Oliva and Bertolucci were both involved in an act of “mimetic subversion”: one that engages the enemy on its own ground, but obliquely. Pressed in an interview published in 1972 in the film journal Sight & Sound to comment on The Conformist’s relation to history, Bertolucci remarked that, having failed to make films about the present, he instead made a film that arrived at the present by speaking about the past. When the interviewer asked, “There is some nostalgia in Italy for the Fascist period, isn’t there?” he answered: “Yes! That’s why I say that The Conformist is a film on the present. And when I say that I want to make the public leave with a sense of malaise, perhaps feeling the presence of something obscurely sinister, it’s because I want them to realize that however the world has changed, feelings have remained the same. . . . For Italy, the film is really very savage.” In contrast to the chronological sequence followed by the 1951 novel by Alberto Moravia upon which it was based, Bertolucci’s film is structured around a series of flashbacks. The film begins where it will end, with Marcello riding in a car from Paris to a forest outside of Paris, where Quardi and Anna will be gruesomely assassinated by Marcello’s associate: a site whose traumatic meaning is revealed to us only much later in the film. As film historian T. Jefferson Kline elaborates in “The Unconforming Conformist”: “Nothing is explained and nothing will be explained through traditional narrative exposition. Bertolucci’s use of flashbacks is unusual not only for its disregard of chronology but also for the tendency to use flashbacks out of flashbacks. Progression occurs clearly by association rather than logic.” Vitalità and The Conformist—by a curator-auteur and a filmmaker-auteur, respectively, both of whom began as poets—functioned, I believe, in a similar way. Between Alfano’s falling water in Delle distanze della rappresentazione (The distance of representation, 1969) and Pino Pascali’s 32 mq. di mare circa (Thirty-two square meters of sea, 1967), for instance, was Franco Angeli’s room with his depictions of symbols of power: the Roman she-wolf, imperial eagles taken from the US dollar, red stars from Communist banners, Christian crosses next to Nazi swastikas, all of them veiled with cotton

50. “Gilberto Zorio, Corpo di Energia” (Interview with Jole de Sanna), Data 2, no. 3 (April 1972), pp. 16–23.
52. Ibid., p. 68.
gauze sprayed with enamel and all of them painted between 1962 and 1966. Meanwhile, the title of Fioroni’s mural drawings—Studio per: Stanza dei paesaggi, Villa Valmarana, Vicenza, 17 . . .—contains an encrypted date that reads as “71” in reverse.54

“An obscuring of the cupola and a grazing lighting of the bands of black cloth to obtain a virtual doubling of the space”—this is how Bonito Oliva described Vitalità’s entrance space at the time of the Palazzo delle Esposizioni’s restoration in 2004.55 What he is describing is the effect of an eclipse, an alignment of the planets, during which, except at the brief moment of total overlap, a vestige of what lies behind, a trace of the sun glowing around the dark disk of the moon, remains visible. One may argue that the eclipse reveals the importance of what it momentarily hides. It is dangerous to stare at an eclipse: Although one isn’t immediately aware of it, the rays that escape around the edges can burn the eye. Difficult to photograph, an eclipse also mimics, in cosmic terms, the movement of a camera’s shutter opening and closing as it captures its motif. In doing so, eclipses seem to turn the world into an image-making apparatus.56 The two versions of the cover of Vitalità’s catalogue designed by the Florentine press Centro Di also read as an eclipse. The paperback edition is all black, with the title, date, and place running in continuous tiny white script across its middle; the hardcover edition is covered in reflective silver, and the white type runs almost invisibly across the center. The hardcover version comes with two black sleeves that, when fitted on, allow only a sliver of the silver—the area with the writing—to appear. If the negativity of Vitalità del negativo is like that of an eclipse, then one may well ask: What did this concealment paradoxically expose? I would submit that it was not only the link between 1932 and 1970 but, more problematically, the link between 1968 and 1970. This is why Bonito Oliva and Sartogo were taken to task by critics from both the Left and the Right. And therefore the exhibition’s oft-derided oscurissimo title.

54. It might be significant in this respect that Gerhard Richter’s first solo show outside of Germany was at the Galleria La Tartaruga in 1966 in Rome, the gallery of both Angeli and Fioroni, and that most of the paintings in that show were group portraits based on family photographs shot either during or just after (Richter always keeps one guessing) the Nazi years.


56. I would like to thank Kevin Lotery for this observation.