

Monica Bonvicini

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by Annalisa Giacinti, studio photos by Ryan Molnar // Aug. 23, 2024

This article is part of our feature topic [Desire](#).

About six months ago, Monica Bonvicini had to leave her place at the Uferhallen complex in Wedding and relocate to a new studio. For the first time in 15 years, she had to reimagine how to feel in a new space, figure out where and how she could work all over again. The new studio, which sits on the fourth floor of a courtyard building in Kreuzberg, is divided in two by one of the few walls standing in what is otherwise a massive open space. The entrance to the studio is dominated by ‘Waiting’ (2017), a stainless steel railing structure—the kind of architectural element borrowed from airports, checkouts and the like to organise people into queues—which, in Bonvicini’s version, consists of bent bars and features a pair of handcuffs, hanging on a chain and lying on the floor. Big, south-west facing windows make the place bright and airy. While I admire the dazzling exposure to sunlight, Bonvicini holds a pretend grudge: “these windows turned me into a sunset person.”



The studio has two rooms: one presumably for administrative tasks, with four big tables and computers, lined with bookshelves bearing volumes, monographs and catalogues written about Bonvicini's practice. The main room, where we sit for our conversation, hosts sections of past installations, like pieces of yellow timber wood from 'As Walls Keep Shifting' (2019); prototypes of her 'Fleur de Mal' series; yet to be exhibited works; a model of 'She Lies' (2012), sketches of pieces in the making strewn around a working table. There is another tall bookshelf here dedicated to some of her favourite feminist writers, from Simone de Beauvoir to Maggie Nelson.



Bonvicini arrives at the studio, where she's met by her collaborators, at around 10 in the morning everyday. Together they go through the daily tasks, and work to develop ideas that the artist sketches out. Production, on the other hand, is often outsourced to Italy. Her studio process is complex and organic; it requires both cooperation and moments of solitude, which she enjoys in the evening after everybody has left. Bonvicini is focused when she speaks; her tone goes from soft and careful to sly and exuberant. Her ideas seem to run smoothly but incessantly, and build on each other in the same fluid way her

creative process evolves. There's no clear distinction between one project and the next, she explains to me, but the one red thread is an observant preoccupation with space, which has been the harbour around which her work has twined.



Now, for example, she's preparing a show that will be exhibited in October in the deconsecrated church of San Carlo in Cremona, Italy, a city not too far from where Bonvicini was born. The church was acquired on eBay during the pandemic and repurposed as an art space, Bonvicini recounts, finding the fact amusing. It's a project different from anything she's done before, so it requires a different kind of preparation. "I'm thinking, what can I do within the program and what can I do with the architecture of the church?" She has a similar approach with large architectural installations, which she loves putting together. "It's a constant dialogue with the architecture, the people and the risk they want to take, or the kind of understanding of art they have."

Her engagement in architecture came from the need to divert from painting, which is what she originally set out to study. Architecture also represented a logical development of her interest in conceptual and minimal art. "Even architecture magazines were more interesting than the art ones," she recalls. She received her education at UdK, in Berlin, and at CalArts, in California. "I've always been very sensitive to how I feel in spaces, maybe because I'm also a little claustrophobic."



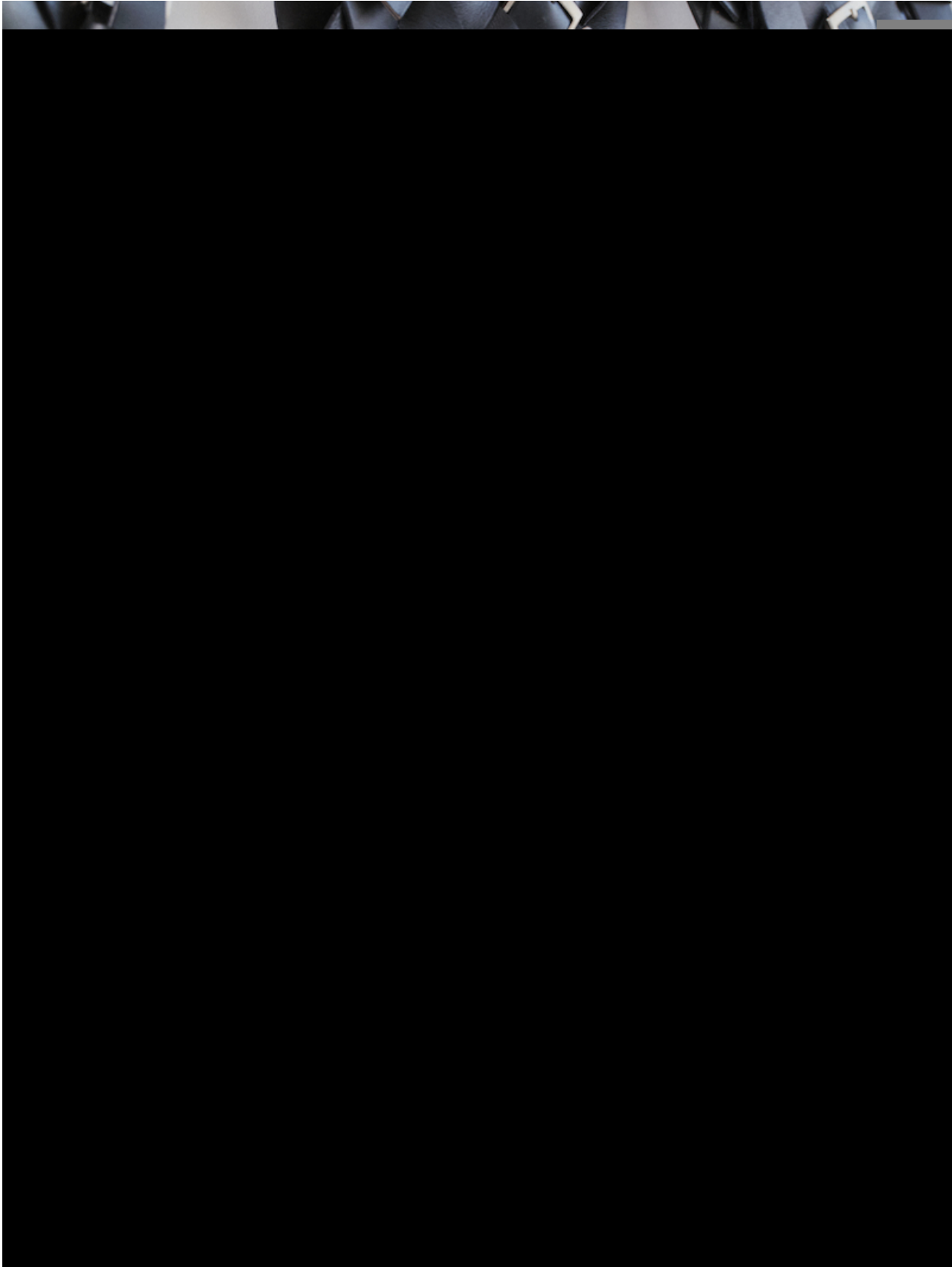
Amongst the texts that impacted Bonvicini's career were Leslie Weisman's 'Discrimination by Design: A Feminist Critique of the Man-made Environment' (1992), on how cities are built and influence societal structures, and 'Sexuality and Space' (1992), a collection of articles on gender in relation to architectural discourse, edited by Beatriz Colomina—a book where she found everything she thought she knew but couldn't express. She also remembers loving the language, which was humorous and almost funny—an expected remark made from an artist whose work famously flirts with irony, provocation and playfulness. Even during our conversation, her sentences are regularly punctuated by a spirited laugh; her answers thorough and well thought-out, while her demeanour remains breezy and light-hearted.

Bonvicini draws a great deal from psychoanalysis, too. In 2006, her iconic 'DESIRE' sculpture, made of polished stainless steel letters, was inspired by a quotation from philosopher Julia Kristeva: "Desire, if it exists, is unalterable, infinite, absolute and destructive." The work, installed alongside store logos in a mall on Lake Avenue in Pasadena, Los Angeles, reflected the sky, while interrogating people's desires in the era of late capitalism.



Desire as a concept is “tricky” to elaborate on for the Italian-German artist, because, as she understands it, it’s something almost impossible to put into words. “It’s everything that arouses you, but not just erotically; it’s a want that cuts itself out before it’s fulfilled.” Like she encapsulated in ‘Latent Combustion’ (2015)—an installation made of a group of chainsaws, drenched in a thick layer of black matte finish and hung from the ceiling by steel chains—desire is “this moment before things can happen, this amazing energy” that may or may not find its release. “It’s like running and having to stop abruptly.”

Desire, however, is not only a self-mutilating, onanistic power, but it's also, and more fruitfully, a collective act. Bonvicini expounds the political potential of desire for change; the queer sense of promise that marks not only her aesthetics, but the deconstructive intent of challenging established ways of thinking about space, architecture and institutions undergirding her work.



She is interested in “everything that’s complicated” and not directly accessible through discourse—the Lacanian Real, the ambiguous, the elusiveness that drives desire and escapes symbolization. The heavy use of text in her art—quotes, literary references, song lyrics—attests to this ever-curious pursuit. Both in large scale public installations, like ‘RUN’ (2012), a permanent sculpture she won the competition for, for the London Olympic Games, or ‘I do You’ (2022) at the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin, and in smaller works, language is for Bonvicini a medium to question dominant models of power, sexuality, exploitation and representation. “I do like it when language becomes sculpture and sculpture becomes language.”

Gathering quotes from her favourite literary works happens for Bonvicini in seemingly Freudian fashion, “in a crazy manic way,” she jokes, evoking Derrida’s concept of Archive Fever. “It takes a level of crazy to collect things without really wanting to put them down, and in a sense, this is a lot about desire.” She uses decontextualized quotations and continuously edits them, doing so not in a desperate effort to record, preserve, control narratives or events, but to ultimately “create much more chaos”— a collage of meanings that constantly slip, shift and twist, creatively and freely.



Bonvicini and I are both from Italy, so I ask her how much of the political desire to challenge patriarchal structures in her work was shaped by having experienced such configurations so closely in the country we were born in. “In Berlin, I found some freedom that I couldn’t have had in Italy, for sure. And I definitely wanted to leave my family and the idea of family,” which in Italy is still so strong. “Italy was a very macho society and I

would get into trouble, while here nobody was really bothering me...I was a good girl there, studying all the time and getting the best grades, and here I could do whatever the fuck I wanted and nobody cared.”

She first came to Germany before the fall of the Wall to learn the language and read the original Nietzsche, never thinking she'd stay so long. “The nothingness I encountered when I came here, in terms of art, altogether with my ignorance about art, made things very interesting.” Now she's one of the most appreciated artists of her generation, and she's passing on some of that experience to young sculpture students at UdK. Bonvicini has held a professorship there since 2003, and is enjoying teaching more and more as she gets older. “There's so many former students of mine who are showing in galleries or museums, and it makes me so, so happy,” she grins with delight. “There's lots of young artists coming out of Berlin nowadays, and you can't say the same thing about my generation, so I think we all did a great job.”



As for her own work, the list of things in the making is long: in September, she will have her first solo show with Tanya Bonakdar Gallery in New York, and present some site-specific large scale architectural work alongside sculptures and drawings. Lately, she's become interested in figurative architecture, and started using capitals from different ancient eras, combining them with texts. Slightly self-conscious, she continues to enumerate the many projects that fill her agenda: the San Carlo project, Gallery Weekend in Berlin, her first public work in Denmark, commissioned for the entrance of a hospital; a show in Split, Croatia, called 'Breach of Decor,' which just opened. She's also building the architectural sculpture 'As Walls keep Shifting' in Austria.

She is calm and collected; she's got the nonchalance of someone who's done this so many times and is versed enough to be grateful, but not excessive about it. Until she decides she's been talking for too long, and so this time she asks me: "*Ma di dove sei?*"

Artist Info

monicabonvicini.net

Exhibition Info

Contemporary Art Space Kula

Monica Bonvicini: 'Breach of Decor'

Exhibition: Aug. 8-Nov. 8, 2024

kula-split.com

Ul. kralja Tomislava 10, 21000, Split, Croatia, [click here for map](#)

Tanya Bonakdar Gallery

Monica Bonvicini: 'Put All Heaven in a Rage'

Exhibition: Sept. 4-Oct. 12, 2024

tanyabonakdargallery.com

521 W 21st St #1, New York, NY 10011, USA, [click here for map](#)