

Give Monica Bonvicini a space and she will fill it with something magical... or disturbing, or provocative. The Italian sculptor, now a citizen of Germany, is a virtuoso when it comes to shaping her work to the environment in which it will be exhibited. Visitors to her latest exhibition at the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin are greeted with a massive placard emblazoned with its title—"I do you." Leaning casually against the facade of the Ludwig Mies van der Rohe-designed structure, the sign mirrors Bonvicini's own posture toward institutional art—respectful but also casual and unconcerned with decorum. As she tells Richard Pallardy for ODDA Magazine, she knows that some of her creations are aggressive and critical. But many are also strangely beautiful and magnetic. "She lies," a mass of glass and metal, suggesting an iceberg, a fallen skyscraper, a sinking ship, as it twists and turns in the currents of the Oslo fjord. And some manage to be both. "Light me Black", an assemblage of 144 fluorescent lights, is both intimidating and inviting. Here, Bonvicini lays out her artistic philosophy—why she is fascinated by movement, what draws her to her materials and what she wants to say with each piece.

"Each work has its own materiality
and each material has different character traits."
—Monica Bonvicini

MONICA BONVICINI

IN CONVERSATION
WITH RICHARD PALLARDY



RICHARD PALLARDY. I'm sure your surroundings have played a very important part in your life and inspiration. Tell me a bit about your background. Where did you grow up? Under what circumstances did your passion grow? MONICA BONVICINI. I grew up in Venice and in Brescia, two very different cities in Italy. If one is romantic I believe the other is the best example of industrial northern Italy. What was the same was the fog in the winter. My passion, if you mean art, came out of a need to do something else than what everybody else around me was doing. Isn't that the reason to do what you want to do in life? R.P. Was your family artistic? Did they support your early artistic endeavors? M.B. My family was extremely supportive of me. They gave me the feeling I could do anything I wanted. I am sure I also somehow convinced them that there was no other way to deal with me other than supporting me. R.P. Did you go to art school? M.B. I went to art college, if that is what you mean. I studied painting in Berlin and art (I have to say it like this) in Los Angeles at Cal Arts. R.P. Did your education inform your artistic endeavors? Or did you find the constraints and formality to be frustrating? M.B. Both. I learnt a lot going to university. Art history, how to do things and why, to talk with colleagues about art and life, politics and all the rest, the parties, what to read, how to be better... all of that was extremely important. I also always had great teachers. R.P. You teach at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna. What do you students? Are there tech-teachers of art should avoid? for 15 years up until the point too good there and so I started teaching when I was now. At the end of the day teach art. On a formal level, and European system and the works of the students should give you the best going to work with, talk about ideas because you cabulary during the years of you to sculpture? Did you before deciding that this I was young, I envisioned the nun. That would have been because it was a lonely I never get bored. But I think with people. To do sculpture that. R.P. You use a wide sculptures. Tell me about your choices... what draws you to a particular material? M.B. Ideas. Each work has its own materiality and each material has different character traits. It depends on what kind of work it is. Black leather is something other than an aluminum cast. I have worked a lot with building materials that anyone can buy at the hardware store. So a lot of times, they're not special materials but each material has to fit the work. In a lot of my installations, you can also see the construction. That's also part of the materiality of the works. Like in the installation "I Cannot Hide My Anger" (2019) at Belvedere 21 in Vienna, where I put a cube of metal panels in the center of the room. Yet from the second floor, you could look down and see the back of the walls and their construction. R.P. Some of your installations are text-based... they are graphic representations of a certain message. What leads you to choose a certain phrase or word? M.B. I remember when I was a child or a teenager sometimes talking back to the television during commercials. I really disliked the imperative form of commercials back in those days-the security in the voice and in the message: you will like this: buy this; you have a headache: take this; you are not easy: we are here for you. I find the language of commercials quite annoying and fascinating. If you think about it, commercials don't have a very long history. Nor does the ability to make a career of sellings products via the use of language. Why not have



attempt to convey to your niques or approaches that M.B. I was teaching in Vienna I thought I was feeling almost I moved to teach in Berlin. quite young. It is different there is not a good way to I try to combine the American I like to listen and talk about a lot. I think any art school friends in life. People you are art, discuss and have fights have formed a similar vo-art school. R.P. What drew experiment with other media was your calling? M.B. When possibility of becoming a quite a calling! I quit painting activity. I like to be alone. it is better to do things in life alone is impossible. I like variety of materials in your

sculptures. Tell me about your choices... what draws you to a particular material? M.B. Ideas. Each work has its own materiality and each material has different character traits. It depends on what kind of work it is. Black leather is something other than an aluminum cast. I have worked a lot with building materials that anyone can buy at the hardware store. So a lot of times, they're not special materials but each material has to fit the work. In a lot of my installations, you can also see the construction. That's also part of the materiality of the works. Like in the installation "I Cannot Hide My Anger" (2019) at Belvedere 21 in Vienna, where I put a cube of metal panels in the center of the room. Yet from the second floor, you could look down and see the back of the walls and their construction. R.P. Some of your installations are text-based... they are graphic representations of a certain message. What leads you to choose a certain phrase or word? M.B. I remember when I was a child or a teenager sometimes talking back to the television during commercials. I really disliked the imperative form of commercials back in those days-the security in the voice and in the message: you will like this: buy this; you have a headache: take this; you are not easy: we are here for you. I find the language of commercials quite annoying and fascinating. If you think about it, commercials don't have a very long history. Nor does the ability to make a career of sellings products via the use of language. Why not have



poetry on a billboard? Why should I be forced to read commercials all the time when maybe I just wanna read something that makes me think-that is not connected to merchandise? I often do what I do not yet see around. R.P. Some of your sculptures are static and others are kinetic... I'm thinking of 'Breathing', which involves a tassel swaying and the sound of a compressor. What led you to experiment with more motion-based art? M.B. "Breathing" is a work I had wanted to do for a long time. I needed the right space to develop it. I am always doing something different. I am not an artist who wants to do the same thing all over again. I am curious; I love to work with new materials, new people and companies. Moving objects have a very special effect. "Breathing" is a bundle of belts hanging from a long black rope. At the first presentation of the work, the ceiling was 10 meters high and the work swung back and forth. The movement was choreographed but unpredictable to the visitor. Some saw it as something threatening, others more like a dance. The sounds of the work played a special role. The pneumatic construction made a sighing sound, hence the title "Breathing". When the belt buckles dragged across the floor, there was a metallic sound. The work was exhibited at "Art Unlimited" in 2019. R.P. You were born in Italy but settled in Berlin. What led you to relocate? M.B. I wanted to leave everything I knew and everybody I knew because I was fed up with what I knew. I came to Berlin in the 80s, moved elsewhere and came back. The 90s were a special time in Berlin. After the fall of the Wall, the city had to grow together again. There were many free spaces to slip into and things to try out. Many clever and creative minds settled here, creating the special flair that still defines Berlin today. That's why I kept coming back to Berlin. R.P. Talk to me a bit about the business side of art. How did you initially secure representation? M.B. That is a difficult question. Exhibitions are of particular importance, of course, because others can see your work. The first invitations to present my work were therefore of crucial importance. From the beginning, I worked with installations and the space. That is something that is difficult to depict. Photos are not enough because the visitors have to experience the space. And then word gets around. Following your path and devoting all your time to it, that's the most important thing. But it's also a lot of work. I've been lucky that curators have given me the chance to exhibit. Galleries then approached me all by themselves. R.P. Is the business side of your calling enjoyable or is it a distraction? M.B. It is very enjoyable if you find people you like to work with and talk to. The business side of being an artist is very important. It can be a total annoyance or a blessing. In the end, it always goes back to the people you are working with. R.P. Are there ways that art dealers and consumers can better serve artists? What are some of the frustrations that you've encountered in attempting to sell your art? M.B. It is still the case that the art of male artists is more expensive and it is seen as a guarantee of investments compared to the artworks by female artists. The difference is reflected in the art market. I must say that in the last 20 years I have seen the rise of female collectors and this is something I really like. There is also this idea that is quite antique that art should be something that elevates your soul, that is there to make you feel better. Certain types of art that are very critical, maybe cynical or radical, are surely more difficult to sell. Generally speaking, I would say that you have to trust artists. It is such a difficult line of work. Just trust in them and take into account the risks they are taking in their life in order to create. R.P. What are your current preoccupations? Are you working on anything new? M.B. At the moment you can see my solo exhibition "I Do You" at the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin. It's an exhibition that, like many of my other projects, works with space. The famous building by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe is made of glass, all around, on the first floor. This makes that space permeable. I have a large mirrored panel leaning against the roof of the National Gallery. Only if you can read the words "I do you." This work deals with the question of who actually makes whom. Does the museum make the visitor or does the visitor make the museum? I used extra facade material as the material for this panel. So it's also about which face a building shows. At the same time, the panel reflects Berlin and opens up a dialogue between the city and the museum. It's always very special to do an exhibition in the city where you live. There will be concerts at the exhibition and maybe dance. Visitors can also use parts of the installation. You can sit on chain swings, for example. With the sound that the chains make, the visitor contributes to the soundscape of the exhibition. In addition, people are invited to participate in the performance "You to Me" and be handcuffed for 30 minutes. This opens up completely new possibilities for the visitor to perceive the exhibition, but also him-or herself. All of a sudden you become part of the exhibition. So, although it is an exhibition that has already opened, it is very much alive. And it should be. This year I'm focusing on works





"I Do You" 2022, © Monica Bonvicini and VG-Bild Kunst, Bonn 2023
Photo by Jens Ziehe



"Gasping" 2022, © Monica Bonvicini and VG-Bild Kunst, Bonn 2023
Photo by Jens Ziehe

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"Breathing" 2017, © Monica Bonvicini and VG-Bild Kunst, Bonn 2023
Photo by Jens Ziehe



"Breathing, detail" 2017, © Monica Bonvicini and VG-Bild Kunst, Bonn 2023
Photo by Jens Ziehe

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in public space. The locations play a very crucial role. Right now I'm making designs for Belgium, temporary designs for a light festival in Germany, and a large outdoor work in Italy. I won a competition in Canada, and planning is continuing here as well as for a large sculpture in Denmark. Public works play a big role for me. Consider "She Lies" on the fjord in front of the Opera House in Oslo. Sometimes they take years of planning before they finally stand. We'll see when these works are all inaugurated. I also have another project planned this year with the original glass panels that I secured during the renovation of the Neue Nationalgalerie and which are currently integrated into the exhibition. R.P. Is there anything you'd like the world to know about your art that might not be self-evident? M.B. What you see is what you get but you have no idea of it yet.



Glasses TALENT'S OWN, Coat JOSEPH, Shirt and pants MAGLIANO, Boots MAISON MARGIELA



Glasses TALENT'S OWN, Sweater T/SEHNE

"I like to be alone. I never get bored. But I think it is better to do things in life with people." —Monica Bonvicini