

## AN INTERVIEW WITH FRANCESCO CONZ

*On 14 June, I had the pleasure of interviewing Francesco Conz, collector extraordinaire, in his home in Verona. He is a man of vast interests. His collecting is primarily devoted to Fluxus artists from around the world, but other artists and movements are clearly represented including the Wiener Aktionist artists such as Nütsch, Brus, Muehl and Schwarzkogler, Spanish Zaj (that includes Marchetti, Hidalgo, Ferrer), Pierre Molinier, Al Hansen, Allan Kaprow, Carolee Schneemann, and others, the great majority of them involved in inter-media art. The forms of expression and documentation are equally diverse including hundreds of artist's editions in various media, visual poetry, video and a vast array of fetish objects from artists such as Al Hansen, Joe Jones, Ben Vautier, Alison Knowles, Gunther Brus, Alice Hutchings, Hermann Nütsch, Otto Muehl, Jon Hendricks, Geoffrey Hendricks and Allan Kaprow. He has accumulated thousands of photos and negatives, warehouses of art. There are important works and documents of Dick Higgins, Bernard Heidsieck, Robert Watts, Ay-O, Ben Patterson, Nam June Paik, Charlotte Moorman, Sari Dienes, Daniel Spoerri, Roland Topor, Philip Corner, Dorothy Iannone, Esther Ferrer, J. F. Bory, Joe Jones, Mieko Shiomi, Bernard Heidsieck, Henri Chopin, Eugenio Miccini, John Furnival, John Giorno, Giuseppe Chiari, Jean Dupuy, Milan Knizak, Ken Friedman, Takako Saito, Emmett Williams, Ann Noël, and many others. He has a collection of well over forty pianos "decorated" by artists and some waiting to be articulated, a great many typewriters, a collection of Lettrisme, and various cars, one of which was covered with poetry by Augusto and Haroldo de Campos, Gomringer, and Pignatari. Conz lives and works in his art, the art of documenting and collecting. He is comfortably elegant in everything he does.*

*When did you begin to collect?*

My approach to collecting is based on my understanding of cultural history, modernity, the vagaries and epiphanies of life experiences, chance encounters and the influence of my family. I began collecting at the end of the 1960s after traveling and working abroad as a young man, but my early collecting was of Italian art that was directly influenced by American Pop Art. My experiences while abroad in the late 50s and early 60s were of great importance; I had learned a variety of languages and was open to various cultures. I worked my way around Europe in the 50s. For short periods of time I was a window dresser at Liberty's of London, a valet to the Duke and Duchess of Windsor in Paris, and I worked as cook on the yacht of a Mr. Traverse in Monaco.

There was also a great deal more. My initial openness to experiences abroad was influenced directly by my family's business interests, my general upbringing and my education. My family was Austro-Hungarian originally, and in the last century conducted an agency that transported people from Innsbruck to Padua on pilgrimages in honor of St. Antonio. And one of the stops was at Cittadella, one of the oldest fortified cities. My father had a great business there, and Cittadella is the town where I was born. As a young man I was sent to the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart in Milan, thanks to my mother's conservatism, where I studied law and business administration for three years. But then one morning, I packed my suitcase and left the country and went first to Paris, and then to London, where I worked on Upper Finchley Road as a truck driver delivering mannequins. Then I worked at Liberty's in Oxford Street as a shop assistant, and as a cook at Angel Hotel in Henley-on-Thames where a friend was a waiter. Then I went to Spain where life was cheap. Then on to Hamburg in Germany for a year, working as a social assistant, as a go-between who staid in touch with hundreds of Italian workers. They had all sorts of bureaucratic problems with work and residence permits. I even worked for Hamburg Locksted TV as a cable carrier, and this was 1960. It was so boring. There were hundreds of employees, and it was the beginning of television and people had such specific repetitive jobs. But really, the most interesting period was in the employment of the Windsors.

I traveled around the world, visiting many museums and within me I had a very powerful force which I cannot describe. The Duke of Windsor had a wonderful library and after my day of arduous duties, I began to read, Proust, Joyce, and so on. I was passionately in love with poetry and literature, and I began to visit museums so as to study the ways in which the visual arts related to literature. Later, in Italy again, I opened a restoration laboratory which was a great success. This was in the late 1960s. Yet with this traveling and the visiting of so many museums, my passion overcame me and I began to avoid the factory I had established and I opened a small gallery opposite the Fenice Theater in Venice, called the Galleria d'Arte Moltiplicata. As factory owner and art enthusiast I went back and forth from Cittadella to Venice. But things with the gallery weren't really satisfactory, since I had very little direct contact with the artists. Other galleries lent me shows. And I wasn't working with the artists I'm working with now.

*Who were the artists you were working with?*

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It was a question mainly of the second generation of European Pop Artists, who were very aggressive and very arrogant. I had the feeling of being "used." And I also began to realize that I was fundamentally interested in a particular stream of activity where many different things came together, from literature to poetry, to the visual arts, and even to performance (or to "actions" as they were called in the early 60s). I was very much aware of the general history of culture, and this allowed me to build bridges between religious ritual and actions or performance, and to create a number of links between ancient, local craft traditions and the mechanical techniques associated with modernity.

My attraction to inter-media artists was cemented in the early 70s. In 1972 I happened to visit a small exhibition in Berlin where I met the American artist Joe Jones, along with Helga Retzer, of the DAAD, a program for foreign artists in Berlin. I loved the quality of Joe Jones' work. Then I met Günter Brus, who introduced me to Hermann Nitsch, who introduced me to the rest of the Viennese Aktionists, to the Wiener Gruppe, and also to Pierre Molinier and others. My real conversion came about as the result of seeing the behavior of the artists themselves. I was struck by their generosity and accessibility and openness to other media and disciplines, which other artists at the time did not demonstrate. So I said to myself, "This is a part of the world I do not know."

In Romanticism, with Schlegel and others, they speak of a Sanctity of Art, and this is an attitude to which I feel most drawn. In fact, someone asked me the other day why I don't establish a Church of my own, such as Robert Delford Brown's Church of the Exquisite Panic Incorporated. But I'm really much more interested in my own idea of a fetish collection, which I continue to develop and plan to present at sometime in the fairly near future. Art is so much purer than the church. Artists don't have to do miracles, since they themselves are miracles, and encounters with certain artists can truly change your life. The official saints of the church are first of all chauvinists in the service of the political goals of the church. Real saints don't have to perform miracles to prove their sanctity. Artists are involved in the everyday chaos of life and art, and they promote a debate which is somehow central to the notion of enlightenment.

#### *What happened with your gallery in Venice?*

After making the acquaintance of Nitsch, Joe Jones, Gerhard

Rühm and the Wiener Gruppe, I returned to Venice and simply closed the gallery. I knew it was time to do something new. A certain Conte Baglioni then told me about an empty palace he had in Asolo, which is a small town not far from Venice and Treviso. It was famous for its Palladian villas, and especially for Villa Maser, and in the 1970s it was virtually a paradise, with a population of about five hundred people and no tourism. Palazzo Baglioni was a perfect situation and I was very happy with the idea of being able to rent it. So I created a small private gallery and invited various artists to come to Asolo to hold shows in it. Joe Jones stayed in Asolo for all of seven years! The move to Asolo happened just that fast and I was already certain of the new path I had to follow. Nitsch at Asolo produced what he considers one of his finest works, the "Asolo Raum," last exhibited in the MOCA touring exhibition "Out of Actions." Brus did a work called "La Croce del Veneto." Then came Muehl, Marchetti, Juan Hidalgo, Alison Knowles, Emmett Williams, Nam June Paik, Carolee Schneemann, Charlotte Moorman, Philip Corner, Takako Saito, and many other inter-media artists. There was also Michael Morris and Vincent Trasov working on their extensive archive and planning editions and performances, and many others as you've mentioned earlier. In 1979 I left Asolo since it had become too isolated for the kind of art productions and exhibitions I foresaw. I moved to Verona, and began producing editions on many materials from linen to vinyl and stained glass, fine artist books, performance photography. I sold my old collection of European Pop Art and dedicated myself to the art of the artists I truly appreciate. It was in my house in Verona that Robert Filliou did his last performance before entering the Buddhist monastery in which he died.

#### *Why do you work with such a narrow range of artists?*

Work by the artists I am interested in will become part of the history of art, and I believe that every fifty years we make the same mistake with artists of their caliber—the Cages, the Brechts, the Higgins. We avoid the artists of today who are important for new conceptual departures, ruptures with tradition, those who fall through the cracks of both institutional support and commercial structures. Many of the artists I have worked with, from the Viennese Aktionists to Pierre Molinier, have directly informed the work of well-known contemporary artists, many of whom are over-promoted in the commercial art world—Mike Kelley, Paul

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McCarthy, Bruce Nauman, Jeff Koons, Chia, the transavanguardia and people like that. This isn't to say that they are not good artists, but people ought to know that they owe a great deal of their inspiration to inter-media, and to transgressive acts on the part of artists who came before them. The marketplace, however, is blind to all of this, since it is bound to the images of only a very few artists whom it crassly promotes and throws into the limelight, time after time after time. The Church of Art has its own Paradise, Purgatory and Hell. The true creators live in its Paradise. Purgatory is for the mediocre artists. Hell is where we find the copiers, whose only real God is money as their God. Creativity has nothing to do with capitalist promotion and propaganda machines. Creativity has nothing to do with capital gains, and I say this as an ex-businessman who understands the relationship between art and capital! With this in mind I have to say I have a great prejudice against the dominant interests of the American art market and influential art institutions. It's not that I have anything against Americans, but I abhor the idea that Art equals Money.

*You don't think that commercial success is important.*

This relationship between art and money is a thorny issue. I have many American artist friends but no country mistreats its artists so badly as America. They often come to Europe to find a haven. In America, there are great people who have died poor. Why do we not look at the past and learn from it, taking up what was mistreated—such as the work of Cage, who is still greatly undervalued. The same could have been said of Magritte not too long ago. Or of Breton and Marinetti. Europe too is far from safe from the idea that art equals money. The problem is that the museum donors are largely business people, socialites and so on. As capitalists they want to apply the same parameters they give to business to the museums they represent in trust, with an eye to the bottom line—which is not a bad attitude—but that eye invariably extends to the crass promotion of art and artists they have a vested interest in. A museum's tax credit for a donation is no longer enough—the meddling is incredible. The commercial galleries enter the museums and leave out the very essence of creativity. Their only concern is with the board of directors.

It's much the same with art and architecture. Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Bilbao ought to create a sense of hope: here is an architect who understands to some extent the relationship between artist, artwork, space and architect, in a foreign land. But this isn't to say that he understands the

international context in which he is asked to work, which is very difficult and problematic, and marked by the Guggenheim's embrace of global capitalism. Global and international are quite different. The most obvious, annoying thing about Bilbao is the lack of Spanish artists; a few Tapies at one end of the third floor isn't enough. And where is ZAJ, one of Spain's most creative movements of all times? And what about the curators and program staff? Who do they represent? I think you will find that they represent the interests of cultural imperialism. Bilbao, fortunately enough, is a Basque territory that puts up resistance to this sort of colonization, and I hope that this attitude of global cultural imperialism will become just as unacceptable everywhere. And I realize the world is encouraged to embrace a Disneyfied cultural landscape right now but again it will be artists who offer a way out, providing a counter current against this horribly boring global trend that is limited to the bottom line politics of creative capitalism and not able to handle the anarchy of great art.

Real art will always exist outside the walls of the commercial cultural behemoths fostered by the watchers of the bottom line—beyond the ice-cream stands, restaurants, gift shops, ticket booths, and the great landscape of the museum as cultural attraction which is being domesticated for mass consumption, like a cultural Disneyland, which is what the Getty amounts to. The real spectacles of a living culture are still to be found outside these one-stop culture traps. And the average citizen isn't used to a train without a conductor. Where is it going to lead? Will the doors open to Paradise? You get out and the first thing you meet is an espresso machine, ice cream, you look at the panorama, and you bring what skills you have to understanding the visual and aural stimuli before you. Across America, government and private interests have severely cut arts spending in public schools just when young people (and adults for that matter) need more information to decipher or deconstruct the commercial image landscape. Why would you do that to the young citizens of the world? It is a very, very confusing landscape and one needs to be informed of cultural histories, of politics and intellectual strategies, of an ideological base to decipher the commercial image landscape to see how it affects one's values and needs. The high school in Colorado that suffered the massacre, Columbine, can you tell me what level of importance the arts played at that school prior to the shootings? I would not be surprised to hear that the killers of fellow students and teachers did not have access to arts programs where feelings of isolation and inadequacy, or superiority and so on, could be addressed, where their creativity could be channeled. Now Columbine will turn to the arts like it is a soother, a salve. But it is too late. Real art does not exist in the vacuum in which they will likely bring

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it. There is one successful context for remedial arts, the work of Tim Rollins and Kids Of Survival comes to mind, and his process takes a great deal of time, patience and hard work, a willingness to understand an often difficult cultural history that is often at odds with the Puritanical threads of thought that permeate public thought in America.

The sense of spirit and mystery must co-exist with a critical approach to art. This is often impossible in Italy. Coca-Cola and the Catholic church often seem to be branches of the same organization. Behind the rubric of a moral culture is the culture of the pretense of converting others, which is something I cannot accept. Two years ago in Perugia, they slammed the door in the face of the Dalai Lama. They have always closed the door on equality of the sexes. As a woman why would you accept an interpretation of the scriptures that casts you as second best, less than, and open to abuse?

Art and the church have more in common than the notions of paradise, purgatory and hell. The church is a model for an institution like the Getty, and both the church and the museums have abandoned the very meaning of the culture they ought to foster. Just think of the way in which the Second Vatican Council discarded the traditions of its own functions and its own music, replacing them with folk masses, pop songs, and sing-alongs. Today's museum curators are involved in the very same thing. Their only commitment is to the secular parameters of present-day market economies. Just as cuisine has been reduced to hamburgers, the church and the museum have likewise suffered an enormous loss in cultural awareness. And these poisonous attitudes have already been accepted.

*You think of yourself not only as a collector, but also as an archivist.*

I think the importance of archives is still overlooked. If the Fluxus artists will not be forgotten, it is because of these young scholars who have taken it upon them selves to recognize these saints who have been demonized in official culture but who have been recognized in these very interesting publications. There is a great abundance of books written about inter-media. But where do you go to find a book printed in an edition of only a thousand copies? You have to look for them in the Archive Solm in Stuttgart, or at the Conz Archive in Verona, or with Plug In Editions on the internet, and I think it is ridiculous that museums do not buy archives. Museums should see it as a duty to recognize people who have collected books, preserved documents and organized archives of mail art, like Anna Banana's archive. They should purchase archives such as the one organized by

Michael Morris and Vincent Trasov of Image Bank, and by Scott Watson at the Belkin Art Gallery in Vancouver. In Vancouver, they are organizing a precious archive of mail art from Ray Johnson. Their touring exhibition of Ray Johnson correspondence art re-assesses the impact of mail-art, ephemera, scatological references and so forth, all of which are important starting points. The Whitney's recent Ray Johnson show missed the mark. The Whitney has a market-driven program and they weren't able to deal with the ephemera that lay in the strategy behind Ray Johnson's work. I think the Vancouver-based artist Michael Morris understands the social dynamics that infuse Ray Johnson's best work and he explores this with great success. Another great archive in which the museum's have shown no interest is the photo archive of Dick Higgins.

We are living in a period of ignorant collectors who remain doggedly unaware of the whole atomic age and the infinite possibilities of information which are offered by the modern media. These collectors do not want to know, they just do not want to know. A Morandi lithograph, for instance, published in an edition of forty, will sell for twenty-five thousand dollars. A good original work by John Cage will be sold for less than half that much. The level of disinformation seems like a true and proper plot, a veritable inquisition with true and proper martyrs: artists who suffer privately and in silence. Responsibility for culture lies entirely in the hands of curators, museums and conservators who are paid by the state, and who offer no recognition to the expansiveness of creativity. Here too, of course, you'll find exceptions, but there's a generally demonic atmosphere around these captains of culture who refuse to recognize true creativity, and to whom it never occurs that the seeds of creativity may very well be revealed by a crumpled piece of paper or some other scrap of ephemera in an artist's archive.

*What will happen to your Archives with so many thousands of pieces?*

Well, we are tied to the economics of conservation and promotion. It needs a big museum. I have thousands of negatives and I don't have the funds to print them. I need assistants, but I don't want to have to instruct them on the intrinsic value of all these works. It is a vast Archive, one of the largest in Europe. The museums are generally not yet interested. Money makes money, and art is a form of currency. But this work does not have a market. They will pay three hundred thousand dollars to buy a small and insignificant Warhol, but when they are offered a vast archive of intermedia artists, they do not want it.

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But somehow or another, the Archive will survive. Or maybe it will and maybe it won't. I'd like it to survive, since so much passion and energy have gone into creating it, but I also understand that I have done what I have done because I have wanted to do it. And having done it is in many ways enough. I have chosen the way I want to live my life, and the people with whom I have wanted to live it. There are real values involved. I have complained about the museums, I have complained about the market, I have complained about all sorts of things, but I have no complaints about the life I

have lived. The artist as some kind of star is a very new notion, and a notion that doesn't really interest me. Artists are important when they live according to values that society doesn't know how to preserve or respect. The artist who lives like a millionaire will suffer from the same poverty of spirit that afflicts the lives of all the rest of the millionaires. I'm much more interested in the artist who can live like a saint.

