

The contribution of Italy to Fluxus

The experience of Rosanna Chiessi

In 2002 Ben Patterson created an installation in perfect Fluxus-style entitled *Constellation of the first magnitude*, a site-specific artwork designed for the exhibition *The Fluxus Constellation*¹ at Villa Croce in Genoa, in occasion of the movement's 40th anniversary. The idea of defining the movement founded by Maciunas as an agglomeration of many stars in a single sky, tracing different but connected paths, is particularly significant, especially regarding the nature of the Fluxus movement in Italy. The concept of diversity in unity returns very often studying Fluxus in Italy: the Country was probably a suitable territory for the flourishing of the movement, because presents itself unity and diversity, from a cultural, geographical and linguistic point of view.

Paying attention to the maps -celestial, terrestrial and artistic- is fundamental to understanding Fluxus in Italy, because of its nomadic nature. The artistic movement developed in Italy almost randomly, moving from one city to another, just as the Fluxus artists themselves moved from one discipline to another, experimenting hybrid forms of art.²

The year that opened the possibility of Fluxus to the Italian territory is 1963, when Mr. Fluxus took a long trip in Italy with his mother. Thanks to his testimony and enthusiasm, Fluxus artists from all over the world began to explore Italy as a stage for their art. Since the 1960s, the entire Country has been crossed by concerts, performances, happenings and exhibitions, which took place mainly on the streets, in garages and parking spaces.

¹ At the museum Museo d'Arte Contemporanea di Villa Croce, Genua, 14.02.2002/16.06.2002;

² For a detailed overview of the maps followed by Fluxus in Italy: *Fluxus in Italia*, C. Gualco, Il Canneto editore 2012;

Italian gallerists became immediately curious about the chaotic power of Fluxus. Many Italian art experts went to Documenta 5. in Kassel in 1972 and this date marks the first real official encounter between Fluxus artists and Italian gallerists, which began their commitment to promoting Fluxus in Italy.

In the late 1970s Italy was considered a second home by Fluxus artists, strongly supported by Italian collectors, publishers, and gallerists. The Country became so fundamental to the evolution of the movement that the Italian art critic D'Avossa entitled one of his essays³ *Fluxus Peninsula*, almost defining the name of the Italian constellation, so specific for its features. In this *Fluxus Peninsula* constellation the brightest stars were the galleries and collections of Gino Di Maggio in Milan, Francesco Conz in Asolo, Luigi Bonotto⁴ in Vicenza, Peppe Morra in Naples, Caterina Gualco in Genua and Rosanna Chiessi in Cavriago and Reggio Emilia, on whom this short essay focuses.

What is surprising about the *Fluxus Peninsula* is that there are both large cities like Naples and Milan and small towns too: in these villages gallerists were actually pioneers, committed to the spread of Fluxus, often struggling with a very closed and traditionalist society.

Just as the Fluxus movement gave ample space to women, among the top gallerists and publishers connected to Fluxus there are a lot of great women, like Rosanna Chiessi (1934–2016). The contribution of Chiessi is still considered fundamental in the Italian Fluxus scenario. She is defined as a publisher, gallerist and promoter of conceptual art, but certainly these labels do not tell enough about her personality, outside the conventional boxes. **(CL_001)**

Her eclectic biography is full of life-changing choices, which show that for her art, work and private life were totally the same.

The first of these pivotal choices was that in 1962, when she bravely opened a small art gallery in Reggio Emilia, called "Il Portico". This professional decision -took being

³ *Fluxus in Italia*, C. Gualco, Il Canneto editore, 2012, pp. 96;

⁴ Luigi Bonotto was crucial in the diffusion of editions and multiples, which contributed substantially to the spread of the Fluxus movement in Italy. To learn about Bonotto's work: *Fluxus arte per tutti. Edizioni italiane dalla Collezione Bonotto*, Danilo Montanari editore, 2023;

almost a self-taught in the art world- reveals a lot about Chiessi's character: independent, strong-willed and contrary to the Italian vision of the housewife-woman in the 60'.

In '69 she decided to take a trip to Germany with some friends, to experience the artistic ferment. This journey changed her career forever. In Düsseldorf she met by chance Joseph Beyus and with him the world of conceptual art, Visual Poetry and Viennese Actionism. Precisely inspired by Visual Poetry, midway between visual art and literature, in 1971 she founded in Reggio Emilia the publishing house *Pari&Dispari*⁵, which quickly gained reputation within the contemporary art scene and participated in the most important international art fairs, such that of Düsseldorf and Basel. It was during these art fairs that the encounter between Chiessi and Fluxus took place, in the names of Joe Jones, Takako Saito, Nam June Paik, Charlotte Moorman, Hermann Nitsch and Dieter Roth⁶. Her far-sighted intuition made her choose to support these artists, who were still unknown in Italy in the early 1970s.

Mutual trust and friendly-atmosphere became central to her approach to artists, certainly successful, especially with the wild and brilliant nature of Fluxus artists, for whom Chiessi became a staple. Her role ranged from gallerist to cook, from collector to seamstress, from friend to patron. This hybrid form of collaboration took shape above all in the kitchens of her homes -in Reggio Emilia and then in Cavriago-, which became the perfect places for artists to design creative projects, happenings and performances and to plan concerts and festivals. In this sense Chiessi can be described as a collector of human relationships: she turned every working contact into a friendship, based on cultural exchange, support and fun.

⁵ *Archivio storico Pari&Dispari. Edizioni e opere*, AA.VV., Biblioteca Panizzi, Reggio Emilia, 2016;

⁶ *Rosanna Chiessi. Pari&Dispari*, curated by Lorenzo Balbi, Danilo Montanari Editore, 2018;



In over 50 years of activity she was actually a pioneer, going so far as to organize widespread art festivals⁷, which for that time were extremely avant-garde. The first of this long series of festivals was *Tendenze d'arte internazionali*, organised in 1977 in Cavriago, in collaboration with the

leading representatives of the Fluxus movement. The entire city was literally invaded: artists performed⁸ in the main squares, in the streets and also in citizens' homes and garages. The Festival had a great resonance but being extremely innovative it met with the disapproval of many spectators, totally strangers to the world of contemporary art. Chiessi's decision to proceed unhesitatingly by organising many other festivals later helped both to define the geography of Fluxus in Italy and to shape the perception of contemporary art in the Country. Almost as if Chiessi was so close and devoted to Fluxus art that she had internalized some of the pillars of this art, including the democratization of art and the closeness to people, even at the cost of upsetting them.

In the 90s -upon request of the heirs of the house- Chiessi began to manage Malaparte's House in Capri. *Casa Malaparte* is a private villa that has always been an important place for culture and contemporary art. She lived there for a period and the entire island became her gallery, open to welcome art residencies, exhibitions and performances.

During her life she travelled a lot, to visit artists' studios and to expand her contacts and art interests. In 2000 and 2002 she even opened two art galleries in Berlin: *Pari&Dispari Project* and *ArtinProgress*, which from the very beginning presented very active programmes, perfectly reflecting her tireless attitude to knowledge. So tireless that in 2004, at 70 years old, she approached Gutai Japanese art and she became so

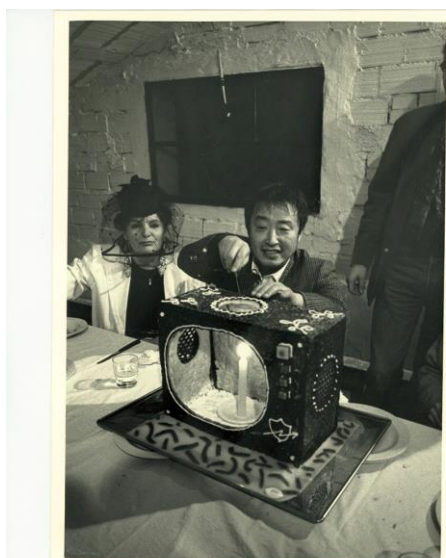
⁷ It was during one of these festivals that Rosanna Chiessi's most important collaboration with Nam June Paik was born. In 1990, Chiessi organized the first exhibition of the artist in Italy at the Chiostris di San Domenico (Reggio Emilia);

⁸ Among the performances there is also the first live Fluxus collective concert in Italy;

intimate with the artists of the movement that in 2007 she was one of the founders of the *Shozo Shimamoto Association*, a cultural institution founded in Italy and Japan and based in Naples.

A surprising fact in such an international context is that Chiessi could not speak English and only ever communicated with the artists with looks and gestures, which denotes an extraordinary ability to empathize with people.

In all her vivid career -and life- Chiessi meticulously documented her activity through photos, including both work and private life, showing how perfectly they were blended together. Her legacy consists in 54 albums with shots of exhibitions, events, performances, festivals, trips and visits to artists' studios, dinners and ping-pong matches with artists at her home. The importance of the *Pari&Dispari* Archive is increased by the fact that it is not only a tangible documentation of such an ephemeral art as the one of Fluxus, but also by the fact that all this photographic material is accompanied by captions, comments and funny notes handmade by Chiessi.



Calvinho Foto: PPK imita il taglio del
televisione in cioccolato

These albums are a testimony of the work of Chiessi above the entire art scene in Reggio Emilia and Italy in general, from the 60s to her death. In this sense they prove the essential contribution of Italy to Fluxus diffusion⁹, mainly thanks to the Italian art publishers. It is no coincidence that in 2022, during the numerous celebrations organized in Italy to remember the 60th anniversary of Fluxus, several events were dedicated specifically to the role of the Italian art publishing and to the figure of Chiessi.

Recognizing the extreme value of the collected material, the 54 albums of Rosanna Chiessi were donated –after her death- from her daughter to the Panizzi Library in Reggio Emilia, which took care of digitalizing the

⁹ Many albums are dedicated to the Fluxus movement in Italy, in particular albums 50 and 51 are dedicated to female Fluxus artists in Italy;

contents of the albums and making them available online, totally accessible and free of charge¹⁰.

That a library in Reggio Emilia takes care of Chiessi's albums is particularly important, because despite her globetrotting nature, she has always had a strong connection to the places of her origins as an art gallerist. Although the initial reluctance of the local institutions, Chiessi has always been committed to the promotion of conceptual art in her territory, responding to a sort of a personal mission of cultural activism, which still remains a radiant inspiration.

¹⁰ The 54 albums are available at www.panizzi.comune.re.it.

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