



focus

MONICA BONVICINI

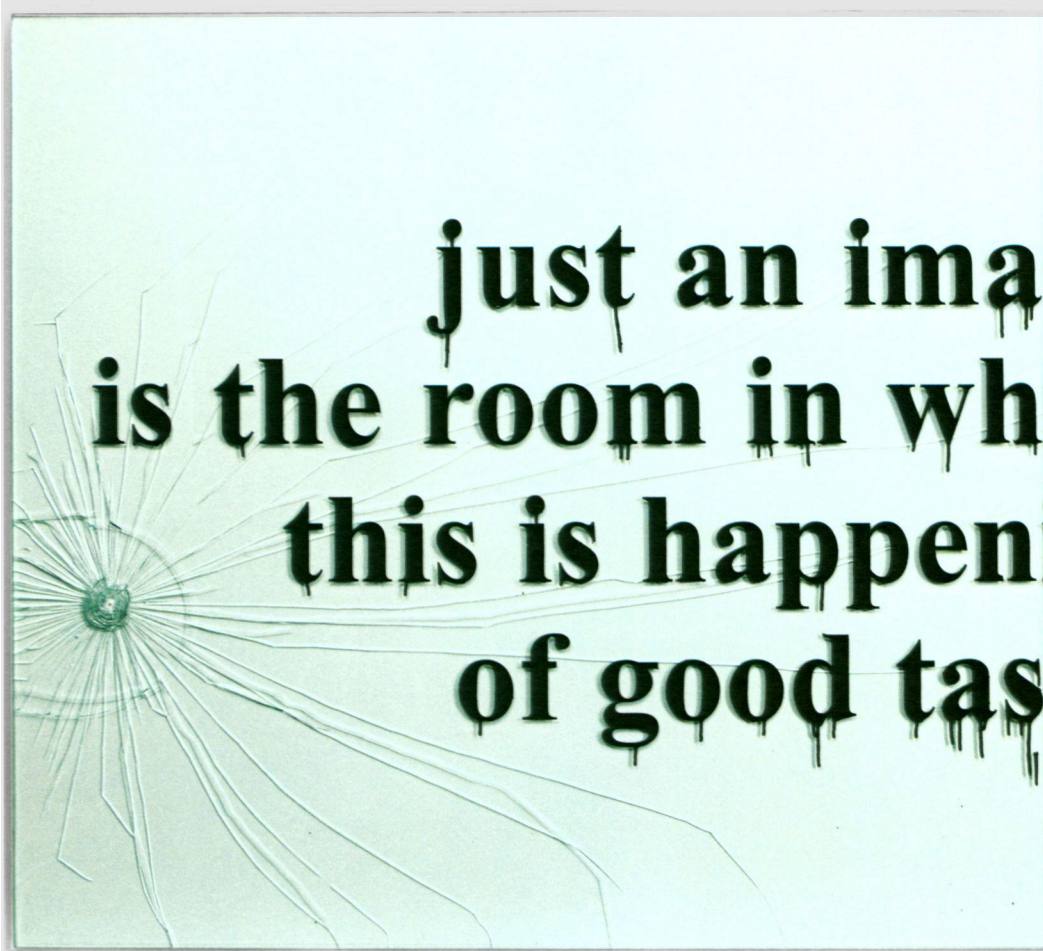
LIGHT ME BLACK

ART
INSTITUTE
CHICAGO

20 NOVEMBER 2009–24 JANUARY 2010

MONICA BONVICINI

LIGHT ME BLACK



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EQUAL PARTS BEAUTIFUL AND MENACING, Monica Bonvicini's drawings, installations, sculptures, and videos provoke an acute awareness of the physical and psychological effects of architecture. For over ten years her work has doggedly dissented from the ranks of contemporary art and architectural discourse that perpetuates the modernist myths of objectivity, social equality, and institutional stability. She has been called a deconstructionist, her work likened in spirit to the architectural interventions of Gordon Matta-Clark, the institutional critiques of Michael Asher, and the provocative feminist programs of Lynda Benglis, VALIE EXPORT, and Martha Rosler. Bonvicini's projects aim to exaggerate the disparity between the sexy, utopian, and avant-gardist claims of certain—largely male—"starchitects" and the realities of the buildings they create, prompting viewers of her work to a deeper engagement with their surroundings and an understanding that there is no such thing as a neutral space. Wryly combining industrial materials that reference the modernist canon—including metal and glass—with the trappings of sexual fetishism—leather, chains, and rubber—Bonvicini confronts the power structures and contradictions inherent in built environments, particularly those dedicated to viewing art. The first **focus** exhibition in the Art Institute of Chicago's Modern Wing, *Light Me Black* brings together three discrete sculptural elements that formally and conceptually engage the Renzo Piano-designed building, recognizing its distinctive character and considerable aesthetic achievements, while also hinting at its potential vulnerabilities.

First exhibited at the 1998 Vienna Secession, *Plastered* (1998–present) is a now-iconic installation that the artist has since re-created 23 times. For the Art Institute version, Bonvicini presents an entire gallery floor constructed out of 4 by 8 foot panels of thin, unfinished plasterboard, placed atop sheets of polystyrene foam. The effect brings the pristine surface of the Modern Wing's signature white walls down to floor level. An apparently random pattern of holes placed in the support layer, however, initiates the weakening and eventual cracking of the sheetrock under the weight of people moving through the space. Thus, the once clean, unspoiled flooring is progressively compromised and fragmented over the course of the exhibition, until only rubble remains. Literally built in order to be destroyed, *Plastered* achieves its artistic end only in its ultimate ruin and creates a scenario in which the flaws and defects in the "white cube" are pre-eminent. As in much of Bonvicini's work, the physical labor of construction—at times

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overlooked in discussions of architecture and here represented by the raw, exposed, and ultimately vulnerable building materials—is played against the fetishized finished product.

Renzo Piano has referred to the Modern Wing as “a temple of light. . . . a building about light and lightness.”¹ In addition to the abundance of natural light entering through windows and skylights, there are over three thousand artificial lighting fixtures in the Modern Wing. Roughly a third of these are fluorescent bulbs used for the non-art spaces including cafés, corridors, the education center, offices, restrooms, shops, and stairways. Inspired by data collected on the number of combined lumens (2,102,400) produced by the 876 32-watt lamps and the cubic area of Gallery 182 (26,460 feet), Bonvicini conceived *Light Me Black* (2009), an immense sculpture comprising 148 custom-built fixtures fitted with bright white fluorescent tubes, commissioned specifically for this **focus** show. At once enticing and foreboding, the work’s intense glow illuminates the entire exhibition, thus precluding the need for traditional gallery lighting. The artist has also positioned the imposing piece off-center in the space, thwarting the near-perfect symmetry of the architecture. The internal structure to which the fixtures are attached remains virtually invisible, creating the impression of a draping veil of light. The sculpture reclaims Piano’s notion of “light and lightness” and pushes it to an uncomfortable, disorienting extreme, producing a temporary blinding effect on the viewer. Similarly, the tension between the immensity of the work—suspended at eight points by black steel rigging chain attached to structural beams inside the ceiling—and its apparent weightlessness recall the architect’s concept of “zero-gravity,” in which the 264,000 square foot steel-framed Modern Wing appears to hover above the ground, as if about to take flight.²

In the third part of the exhibition, a series of untitled laminated safety glass panels are affixed directly to the gallery walls. The sheets depict altered versions of several of Bonvicini’s previous drawings and installations, two of which are large-scale text-based sculptures. *Built for Crime* (2006) comprises 13 block letters fabricated from shattered safety glass and incandescent light bulbs suspended from the ceiling. Represented here, the word *BUILT* appears in black enamel, alone, backward, and with the T falling over, as if the object has crashed to the floor and, ironically, been abandoned to disrepair. The artist also cites her 2006 installation *Desire*, in which polished stainless steel letters are mounted on a billboardlike structure. Again, in the Art Institute rendering, the text is reversed, creating the impression that we are looking out of a window that we cannot actually see through. Indeed, the Modern Wing’s immense glass curtain facade—which Piano replicated on a smaller scale on the east wall of Gallery 182—is invoked, yet complicated by Bonvicini’s use of the material. Her seemingly opaque panes, flush-mounted to the white wall, repudiate



the transparency of the glass that is featured prominently in the rest of the building. The artist envisions the gallery's glass face as a kind of storefront opening onto Griffin Court—the expansive, skylit thoroughfare joining the Modern Wing to the pre-existing museum campus—exposing the gallery to streaming natural light and advertising its contents to the outside. Visitors can observe the exhibition from the court, or they can make the transition from “window shoppers” to active participants and choose to enter the gallery.³

A constant fluctuation between primarily visual and categorically physical modes of experience is a central theme in Bonvicini's practice. The artist has expressed an interest in both “giving and taking pleasure, involving viewers on a physical level—trying to get people to think about where they are, what they are doing and why.”⁴ *Plastered* immediately encourages this shift, as the floor beneath our feet is no longer the firm, stable surface we expect. The visceral response continues as one's eyes and ears adjust to the bright white light and low-frequency hum of the 74 electronic ballasts powering *Light Me Black*. Only then do the images on the perimeter of the gallery slowly come into register, inviting a moment of cerebral contemplation and offsetting the more corporeal demands imposed elsewhere. Functioning for Bonvicini in much the same way that an overwhelming encounter with beauty or an “experience of totality” can be blinding, the illumination turns fleetingly into darkness.⁵ The exhibition title, *Light Me Black*, a twist on the 1966 song *Paint It Black* by the Rolling Stones, refers to this interplay between light and dark. The “me” in the title also attempts to bring the experience of the art out of the realm of the institution, transforming it into a personal, physical encounter in which the audience must take action.⁶ There is an entropic quality to the Art Institute presentation, with its rutted floor and massive radiance that breaks out of the confines of the gallery and dares us to enter, compelling us to look only to make us turn away.

More than any other artist working today, Bonvicini is uniquely situated to re-inaugurate the **focus** series in the Modern Wing and to produce new work that responds to the surrounding architecture with a studied but critical eye. Her work may take the form of bold, irreverent gestures, but it considers the nuances of spatial experience as much as any serious architect's and exhibits the same feel for materials that one demands from a master craftsman. Thus Bonvicini's project well exceeds one of criticism for its own sake. Rather, owing to her profound need to fully engage the terms of specific built environments, her art entails a process of made-to-order *un-building* that builds anew, and differently.

LISA DORIN

ASSISTANT CURATOR

DEPARTMENT OF CONTEMPORARY ART

NOTES

1. Charlie Rose: A Conversation with Architect Renzo Piano, Wednesday, May 20, 2009, <http://www.charlierose.com/view/interview/10318>. Bonvicini was struck by the fact that Piano neglected to mention the art that his “temple of light” is housing, the effect of light on the art that is the building’s reason for being.
2. “An architect spends his life fighting against gravity and, believe me, gravity is the most stubborn law of nature. . . . you have to leave the ground to give air and lightness to your work.” Renzo Piano, quoted in James Cuno and Martha Thorne, *Zero Gravity: The Art Institute of Chicago, Renzo Piano, and Building for a New Century* (The Art Institute of Chicago, 2005), p. 3.
3. E-mail correspondence with the artist, October 11, 2009. Bonvicini draws a parallel between the Modern Wing and the Renzo Piano–designed master plan for the business, commercial retail, cultural, and entertainment district of Potsdamer Platz, in the artist’s longtime adopted home of Berlin.
4. Monica Bonvicini, “Nasty, or Unclean, Offensive, Indecent: Monica Bonvicini Interviewed by Andrea Bowers,” in *Monica Bonvicini Scream & Shake*, exh. cat. (Le Magasin, Centre National d’Art Contemporain, Grenoble, 2001).
5. E-mail correspondence with the artist, October 11, 2009.
6. “Some of my works are nothing without the input of other people. . . . it goes back to [a] critique against the endless ‘chilling out’ installations of the ‘90s. You can chill out at home. In front of art you should act.” Bonvicini (note 4), p. 35.



Stairway to Hell, 2003

MONICA BONVICINI

Born Venice, Italy, 1965

Studied at Hochschule der Künste, Berlin, 1986–93; California Institute of the Arts, Valencia, California, 1991–92

Lives and works in Berlin

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2010

Museion—Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art Bolzano, Italy

Monica Bonvicini/Tom Burr, Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus und Kunstbau, Munich; Kunstmuseum Basel, Museum für Gegenwartskunst (cat.)

2009

Frac des Pays de la Loire, Carquefou, France

Increased Anxiety, Sleeping Problems, Sexual Problems, Nausea, Diarrhea, Grieder Contemporary, Zurich

2007

What does your wife think of your rough and dry hands?, Bonniers Konsthall, Stockholm

Never Missing a Line, SculptureCenter, Long Island City

2006

Kunstraum Innsbruck, Austria (cat.)

Not for You, West of Rome, Inc., Pasadena, California

Museum for Contemporary Art Leipzig, Germany

2005

Blind Shot, Galleria Emi Fontana, Milan

2004

Monica Bonvicini/Sam Durant Break It/Fix It, Secession, Association of Visual Artists Vienna Secession (cat.)

2003

SHOTGUN, Tramway, Glasgow

Anxiety *ανησυχία*, Modern Art Oxford, England (cat.)

2002

Kunstmuseum Aarhus, Denmark

Palais de Tokyo, Paris

Bonded Eternmale, Galleria Emi Fontana

2001

Damaged, Krobath, Vienna

Add Elegance to Your Poverty, Galerie Mehdi Chouakri, Berlin

Scream & Shake, Le Magasin, Centre National d'Art Contemporain, Grenoble (cat.)

2000

Oslo Kunsthall

Bad Bed Bud Pad Bet

Pub, Kunsthau Glarus, Switzerland (cat. in German)

RUN, TAKE one SQUARE or two, Salzburger Kunstverein

Bau, GAM Galleria

Civica d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Turin (cat.)

1999

Fuckeduptimes, Galerie Mehdi Chouakri

Galleria Emi Fontana

Anton Kern Gallery, New York

I believe in the skin of things as in that of a woman, Krobath

1998

Destroy she said, Künstlerhaus Stuttgart

444: Four Curators Four

Artists Four Weeks: Klaus Biesenbach Selects Monica Bonvicini, apexart, New York

To Wall Up: Ecstasy, Galerie Mehdi Chouakri

1997

The Solidity of Architecture, the Institutional Defense, Galerie Neu, Berlin

1994

A Place to Call Home, Berolina Haus, Berlin

Die Ecken des Lebens oder über eine perspektivische Architektur der Wahrheit, KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin

1993

Eine quadratische Sehnsucht mit Blick auf einen Traum, Hochschule der Künste

1992

I Muri 2, Main Gallery, California Institute of the Arts

I Muri 1, Mint Gallery, California Institute of the Arts

1991

The Space, Annex 18, California Institute of the Arts

SELECTED GROUP

EXHIBITIONS

2009

Best of Kunstraum Innsbruck 2004–2009, Kunstraum Innsbruck

Berlin2000, Pace Wildenstein, New York

Accrochage, Galerie Max Hetzler, Berlin

Italics: Italian Art between Tradition and Revolution, 1968–2008, Palazzo Grassi, Venice; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (cat.)

Political/Minimal, KW
Institute for Contemporary
Art (cat.)

Prospect. I New Orleans (cat.)

2008

*Female Trouble: The Camera
as Mirror and Stage of Female
Projection*, Pinakothek der
Moderne, Munich (cat. in
German)

Home is the place you left,
Trondheim Kunstmuseum,
Norway (cat.)

*If I Can't Dance, I Don't Want
to Be Part of Your Revolution:*
*Edition II: "Feminist
Legacies and Potentials in
Contemporary Art Practice,"*
Museum van Hedendaagse
Kunst Antwerpen, Belgium

2007

Beneath the Underdog,
Gagosian Gallery, New York

*The Second Moscow Biennale
of Contemporary Art*

This Is Not for You:
Sculptural Discourses,
Thyssen-Bornemisza Art
Contemporary, Vienna

2006

*Como viver junto: 27th Bienal
de São Paulo* (cat.)

Liverpool Biennial, Tate
Liverpool

*Fever Variations: 6th Gwangju
Biennale*, Korea (cat.)

2005

*The Experience of Art: La
Biennale di Venezia 51* (cat.)

No Money, Kunsthalle, Kiel,
Germany (cat. in German)

2004

Funky Lessons, BüroFriedrich,
Berlin; BAWAG Foundation,
Vienna (cat.)

Performative Installation #5:
Performative Architecture,
Siemens Arts Program, Gallery
for Contemporary Art Leipzig

2003

*Poetic Justice: 8th Istanbul
Biennial* (cat.)

Living Inside the Grid, New
Museum, New York (cat.)

*Bewitched, Bothered, and
Bewildered: Spatial Emotion
in Contemporary Art and
Architecture*, Migros Museum,
Zurich; Laznia Centre for
Contemporary Art, Gdansk,
Poland (cat.)

*Urban Creation: Shanghai
Biennale 2002*, Shanghai Art
Museum (cat.)

2002

*Centre of Attraction: 8th Baltic
Triennial of International Art*,
Contemporary Art Center,
Vilnius, Lithuania (cat.)

*Out of Place: Contemporary Art
and the Architectural Uncanny*,
Museum of Contemporary
Art, Chicago; Samuel P. Harn
Museum of Art, University of
Florida, Gainesville (cat.)

2001

Quobo Art in Berlin 1989–1999,
Pao Galleries, Hong Kong Arts
Center; Hamburger Bahnhof,
Museum für Gegenwart, Berlin;
Museum of Contemporary Art,
Tokyo; et al. (cat.)

*Inside Space: Experiments in
Redefining Rooms*, List Visual
Arts Center, Massachusetts
Institute of Technology,
Cambridge (cat.)

2000

Etat des lieux #1, FRI Art
Centre d'Art Contemporain,
Fribourg, Switzerland

*Children of Berlin: Cultural
Developments 1989–1999*, P.S.1
Contemporary Art Center,
Long Island City (cat.)

1999

*Looking for a Place: The Third
International SITE Santa Fe
Biennial* (cat.)

dAPERTutto=Aperto over all:
La Biennale di Venezia 48 (cat.)

*Monica Bonvicini, Liliana
Moro and Grazia Toderi*, de
Appel arts centre, Amsterdam
(cat. in Dutch)

The space here is everywhere:
*Kunst mit Architektur=art
with architecture*, Villa Merkel
and the Bahnwärterhaus,
Esslingen am Neckar,
Germany (cat.)

*Signs of Life: Melbourne
International Biennial 1999*
(cat.)

*Berlin/Berlin: 1st Berlin Biennial
for Contemporary Art* (cat.)

1998

Yesterday Begins Tomorrow:
*Ideals, Dreams, and the
Contemporary Awakening*,
Center for Curatorial Studies,
Bard College, Annandale-on-
Hudson, New York

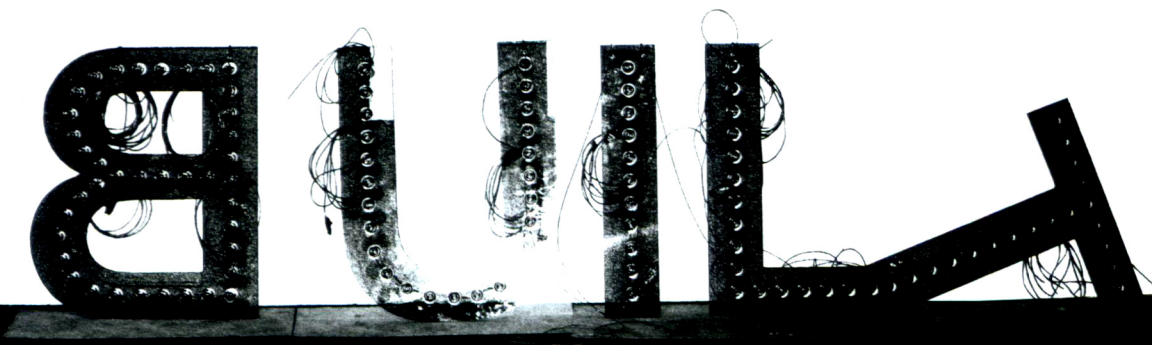
Junge Szene, Secession,
Association of Visual Artists
Vienna Secession (cat. in
German)

Construction Drawings,
P.S.1 Contemporary Art
Center; KW Institute for
Contemporary Art

Heaven—Private View, P.S.1
Contemporary Art Center

1996

Nach Weimar, Weimar,
Germany (cat.)



Untitled (Built), 2009

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- Myers, Terry R. "Monica Bonvicini: Not for You." *Artreview* 4 (Oct. 2006), pp. 148–49.
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about Berlin." <http://www.hausderdeutschensprache.de/ges/mol/dos/ber/kue/en1552221.htm>

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Rebentisch, Juliane. "Monica Bonvicini's Fetish Art." *Parkett* 72 (2004), pp. 26–31.

Robecchi, Michele. "Monica Bonvicini." *Contemporary* 74 (2005), pp. 39–41.

Smyth, Cherry. "Monica Bonvicini: Modern Art Oxford." *Art Monthly* 269 (Sept. 2003), pp. 37–38.

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WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

All works courtesy of the artist,
West of Rome, Inc., Los Angeles,
and Galerie Max Hetzler, Berlin

Plastered, 1998–present
Polystyrene and plasterboard
Dimensions variable

Light Me Black, 2009
Fluorescent lighting fixtures
1.6 x 1.4 x 5.3 m (5 ¼ x 4 ¾ x 17 ½ ft.)

Untitled (Built), 2009
Untitled (Desire), 2009
Untitled (Rime), 2009
Laminated safety glass and
black enamel
Each 1.2 x 1.7 m (4 x 5 ½ ft.)

THANKS

Thomas Barnes, Dennis Ball, Nick Barron, William Caddick, Charles Campbell, Bernice Chu, James Cuno, Markus Dohner, David Egeland, Emi Fontana, Andy Friedman, Jenny Gheith, Sarah Guernsey, Barbara Hall, Howard Harris of Rareform Architectural Products, Dennis Healy, Max Hetzler, Larry Johnson, Corinna Kirsch, Judith Kirshner, Dawn Koster, Kate Kotan, Jeanne Ladd, Chai Lee, Michelle Lehrman Jenness, Meredith Mack, Kimberly Masius, Joseph Mohan, Alfred L. McDougal and Nancy Lauter McDougal, Therese Peskowits, James Rondeau, Zoë Ryan, Samia Saouma, J. Brad Sagona of Hasco Lighting, Dorothy Schroeder, Maria Simon, Larry Smallwood, Jason Stec, Elizabeth Stepina, Frank Weber of Production Plus, Jeff Wonderland, Candice Wong, and Carolyn Ziebarth. Special thanks to the artist. LO

OPENING EVENTS

WEDNESDAY 18 NOVEMBER

6:30–8:30 p.m.
Exhibition Preview
Gallery 182

Opening Reception
Griffin Court

LECTURE

THURSDAY 19 NOVEMBER

2:00 p.m.
Exhibition curator Lisa Dorin
Rubloff Auditorium

GALLERY TALK

TUESDAY 12 JANUARY

12:00 p.m.
Exhibition curator Lisa Dorin
Griffin Court

FRONT AND BACK COVERS: *Blind Protection*
(detail), 2009



This *focus* exhibition is supported by the Alfred L. McDougal and Nancy Lauter McDougal Fund for Contemporary Art.