

Exhibition Review

Mario Badagliacca: Italy Is Out.

Curated by Mario Badagliacca.

Hopkins Hall, The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio.

April 21–22, 2017.

What does being Italian mean in the twenty-first century? This is the question that Italian photographer Mario Badagliacca explores through a simple, yet effective, photographic exhibition displayed for the first time in the United States at the annual American Association for Italian Studies (AAIS) conference held at Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio (the exhibit had a previous online presentation with long-distance participation by the author at San Diego State University and can be accessed at http://www.mariobadagliacca.com/italy_is_out-r7482). This photographic montage is sponsored in part by Transnationalizing Modern Languages—a joint venture involving researchers at major British universities (Bristol, Cardiff, Queen Margaret, St. Andrews, and Warwick) as well as the British government’s Arts and Humanities Research Council. *Italy Is Out* operates according to a simple principle: The photographer’s subjects are an assortment of friends and acquaintances, as well as others he met serendipitously in travels to Argentina, the United Kingdom, and the United States, who agreed to pose for a single portrait in a venue that evokes familiarity to them. Upon request by the artist, they chose three personal objects symbolizing their ties to Italy, regardless of how recent or remote their connection with the Italian peninsula might be (some of the subjects are recent emigrants, while others are children and grandchildren of émigrés who may not yet have visited Italy).

The exhibit, which was mounted at the Hopkins Gallery at Ohio State University, effectively sets up the relationship between the human subjects and the objects of memory by situating the portrait centrally above a triptych of smaller photographs of their chosen material culture. For example, Valerie Lee Di Benedetto, whose paternal grandparents moved from Atrani and Ravello (Salerno Province, Campania) in Italy to Clerkenwell, London, is photographed in front of a grocery store selling Italian-imported goods. Below the portrait are pictures of a family album, a book about Italians in Clerkenwell, and a bracelet that she bought while vacationing on the Amalfi Coast. Similarly, Francesco Guercio, a musician and trained philosopher who grew up in Rome and moved to Brooklyn in 2014, is portrayed in front of his brick townhome in New York. The composition is paired with photos of Italian philosophy books, of Guercio as a baby in the arms of his maternal grandparents, and of the guitar

that he brought from Italy, which he still uses today. Unfortunately, the exhibit labels do not provide much information about the objects besides the details mentioned above, which for this reviewer is a shortcoming of the project, as I wished to know the process that led the subjects to associate these specific items with Italy. Luckily, in the circumstance of the exhibition at Ohio State, the artist's presence obviated this deficiency.

Viewers of the exhibit and attendees of the AAIS conference benefited from the artist talk Badagliacca gave to the public the day following the opening. He reviewed the portraits and objects through a slideshow and then entertained questions from the audience: These ranged from an exploration of his motives for the project to why certain areas of the Italian diaspora were explored instead of others, as well as compositional choices made in pursuing certain subjects and environments and the desire to explore the subject matter on a grander scale.

Badagliacca's responses evinced the difficulty of producing a project with broad-ranging scope and purpose. Because the funding he received could accommodate only a limited amount of the travel that would have been required to expand his study to include other areas of Italian emigration (e.g., Australia and areas of Africa), the artist's grander vision is perforce curtailed, as is a more profound understanding of how those of Italian heritage construct meaningful representations of their "Italianness" abroad. Additionally, at a time when the construct of an Italianness rooted in a geographic origin in the peninsula is being challenged by the contemporaneous migration of refugees from Africa and Asia and by a globalized intellectual workforce moving from Western and Far Eastern countries into Italy, the unidirectionality of the exploration outward from Italy reduces the possible cultural, political, and sociological impact of the exhibit. Indeed, talking about an Italy that is "out" of the mainland and is thus expanding the concept of Italianness through globalized travel, as the title of the exhibit and the artist's comments suggested, necessitates a counter in the paradox of a "non-Italy" that is "in" the peninsula, as is represented by the waves of migrants who have arrived in Italy in the past forty years. (In the artist's defense, another of his photographic projects, titled *Frammenti*, focuses specifically on the shards of existence left behind by migrant refugees in facilities on the island of Lampedusa where they are often held before being processed onto the Italian mainland or sent back to their countries of origin.)

More interesting for the attendees was Badagliacca's discussion of the methods he used to select his subjects, the location of the photo shoots, and the choice of the three objects representing their ties to Italy. Not surprisingly, given Badagliacca's limited resources, he chose many of the exhibit's subjects from contacts made before traveling abroad or through connections made

on the ground. Similarly, his subjects are typically framed in the comfort of their new home environments, either interiors reflecting their interests (e.g., food journalist and critic Julia della Croce's kitchen) and sense of belonging (e.g., couches and armchairs) or against a backdrop of walls that metaphorically suggest the solidity of their residency in their newfound countries. Finally, in describing how his photographic subjects selected the objects that express their emotional ties to Italy, Badagliacca revealed that they were not allowed time to meditate on these choices but were asked to choose on the day of the photographic shoot, suggesting that their selection operates at a more emotional-impulsive level than if the subjects had been granted a longer time to think more carefully about their selections.

Though limited by the shortcomings discussed previously, Badagliacca's exhibit is a welcome contribution to the debate over the concept of Italianness in contemporary public discourse. Clearly guided by aesthetic principles of composition—clean lines, bright lighting, and balanced framing dominate the photographs—Badagliacca's *Italy Is Out* reflects both the desire to reframe what it means to be Italian in a globalized twenty-first century, away from scholarly, twentieth-century models of Italian emigration, and the anxieties that emerge when notions of citizenship and belonging frame a subject between a new homeland and cultural vestiges of a wistful past.

—VALERIO FERME
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Vito Acconci: Where Are We Now (Who Are We Anyway?), 1976.

Curated by Klaus Biesenbach.

MoMA P.S. 1, Long Island City, New York.

June 19–September 18, 2016.

Vito Acconci: Where Are We Now (Who Are We Anyway?), 1976, presented at MoMA P.S. 1 from June 19 to September 18, 2016, featured a survey of early performance and video works by the late American artist Vito Acconci (1940–2017), culminating in an installation piece of the same title and from the same year. What emerges most sharply from this sprawling show in terms of recent preoccupations in contemporary art is Acconci's fixation on the fluidity of gender and identity, a continuous exploration of the decentered self as measured in space. What follows will be a series of notes and sketches, ruminations on possible new avenues of investigation into Acconci's work.