Lara’s own personality reveals, (...) the coexistence of two forces, one tending towards instinctive, spontaneous form, the other instead inclined towards the design project, and largely guided by reason, and it is precisely this union between bursts of vitality and interior rigor that constitutes the peculiarity of her character as scholar and the difficulty of her identifying with one precise critical direction.

Laura Lombardi

In the early sixties, Lara-Vinca Masini succeeded in cementing Florence’s reputation as a vibrant and alternative center for Italian postwar contemporary art and architecture. Throughout her active career Masini strove to support Florence’s home-grown creative talent, while inviting renowned artists and architects from abroad to Tuscany. Masini engaged the city’s galleries, museums, and alternative spaces. She wrote prolifically, worked as an editor, a publisher, and remains to this day an outspoken critic of all things Florentine. Masini played a pivotal role from the outset in the emergence of the Superarchitecture movement that would spawn radical groups like Superstudio, Archizoom, and successively, UFO, 9999, Ziggurat, and others.

Over the years, Lara-Vinca Masini achieved several impressive curatorial successes in cities around Italy. Her accomplishments included the cofounding of the Progressive Museum of Contemporary Art in Livorno, “one of Italy’s most experimental projects of those years.” In 1978, Lara-Vinca Masini was appointed one of principle curators by the Italian Commission for the Visual Arts and Architecture Section for the Venice Biennale (Fig. 1).

In 1980, Masini also curated the controversial Florentine exhibition Umanesimo, Disumanesimo nell’arte europea 1890/1980: Dai Simbolisti al Nouveau Réalisme
She would go on to win the prestigious Lincei Prize for Criticism in Art and Poetry in 1986. It is nonetheless perplexing that someone as productive and as accomplished as Lara-Vinca Masini did not achieve serious international acclaim for her contributions to art and architecture criticism. Evidently Masini worked in a field dominated by men, but she, like many women in her circle, had successfully assumed key directorial and curatorial roles in Italy’s dynamic postwar art culture. While Masini did not purposely make gender an issue in her work, she did promote women artists, mainly in the interest of her long-term research. Several of her female contemporaries would later join feminist movements, like the art critic Carla Lonzi, who quit the art world altogether in 1970 to dedicate herself solely to political feminism, or Lea Vergine, who through her writings and curating defined “Body Art” in Italy, and launched the major exhibition *The Other Half of the Avant-garde*, which toured in Italy and Sweden in the early nineteen-eighties.

Though Masini wrote on a range of historical and contemporary subjects, it would not help that most of her essays and books were published inside Italy and in Italian. Yet, if her publications were not that well distributed abroad, Masini could nonetheless call upon an impressive network of internationally based artists.

(“Humanism and Inhumanism in European Art 1890/1980: From the Symbolists to Nouveau Réalisme”). She would go on to win the prestigious Lincei Prize for Criticism in Art and Poetry in 1986.

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and architects to participate in her curatorial projects. She was, according to the architect and exhibition designer Piero Sartogo, the first to introduce the Viennese architect Hans Hollein to the Italian public.\textsuperscript{10}

It may very well be that none of these issues so far mentioned count as much as Masini’s personal curatorial philosophy, which she stuck close to throughout her entire career and which is a highly unique vision on the arts and architecture. Recognizing a degree of interdependency, Lara-Vinca Masini often sought to emphasize how art and architecture “contaminated” one other.\textsuperscript{11} Throughout her career Masini built up a respectable track record in both the arts and in architecture. And as should become more evident here, Masini would be one of the few to recognize how modern Florentine culture ushered in an era of radical design experiment. Florence’s burgeoning creative culture emerged hand in hand with a third world inspired political ideology promoted by the city’s unusual mayor, Giorgio La Pira, who personally labored to put Florence at the center of the non-aligned nations movement. Throughout the fifties and early sixties, La Pira promoted international film and art festivals, along with peace programs, workers’ rights, and new housing projects.\textsuperscript{12} Yet everyday Florentines remained stubbornly attached to their Renaissance heritage, setting off the kind of cultural wars that would make the city increasingly inhospitable to Masini and her artistic vision.

Masini drew her strength from this paradoxical Florentine culture, but it would come with a cost to her reputation. Her way of working did not reveal unified trends, or as some critics were wont to do, channel different creative strains into a single recognizable movement. Consider how Germano Celant and Achille Bonito Oliva, two of the most reputed Italian art critics among her younger contemporaries, are bound, respectively, to \textit{Arte Povera} and the \textit{Transavanguardia}. From a purely architectural perspective, if we look across the same years that culminate around 1980, the neo-rationalists and the post-modern classicists were the ones who would pull out ahead under the determined tutelage of Aldo Rossi, Manfredo Tafuri, and Paolo Portoghesi.\textsuperscript{13} Kenneth Frampton, when he became disillusioned with the eclectic nature of the postmodernist project, sought instead a more nuanced alternative that would lead to his comprehensive theory on critical regionalism.\textsuperscript{14} Yet Lara-Vinca Masini steered clear of these kind of big assertions, probing instead the intimate processes of creative reason as she worked in dialogue with the exhibitionary context.

Having studied philosophy at the University of Florence, Lara-Vinca Masini began as an editor for the prestigious art journal “\textit{seleArte}” published by Adriano Olivetti, working for the journal from 1959 to 1965. At its highpoint, the magazine published fifty thousand copies per issue. The founder, Ludovico Ragghianti, played an instrumental role in organizing the legendary exhibitions at the Palazzo
Strozzi in Florence on the architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright (1951), Le Corbusier (1963), and Alvar Aalto (1965).\textsuperscript{15}

One of Masini’s early prominent exhibitions, produced together with Marco Dezzi Bardeschi, was the Prima Triennale Itinerante d’Architettura Italiana Contemporanea ("First Itinerant Triennial of Italian Contemporary Architecture"), later assembled into a comprehensive catalogue published in 1965.\textsuperscript{16} This sweeping vision on Italian architecture, delineating an early postwar Italian eclecticism, should be read as a significant prise de position by Masini vis-à-vis the Italian postwar architecture context. The exhibit included over two dozen architecture studios and travelled to fourteen Italian cities. Each architecture office was afforded ample documentation and accompanying texts, often featuring their most experimental projects on housing and public buildings. But the exhibit/catalogue project went further, introducing essays by several of the participating architects, original theoretical essays by important critics, assessments on “housing” and an overview on “local debates,” clearly engaging with the cities hosting the exhibition’s extensive tour through Italy.\textsuperscript{17}

While it is amply evident that Masini mastered the subject of contemporary Italian architecture early in her career, her pursuit of more unorthodox approaches to architecture and its complex but poetic relationship to the arts continued to fascinate her and stimulate her research. While working on the Prima Triennale Itinerante, she was concurrently involved in making other exhibitions. One that jumps to the front is Parabola 66, which opened in the Bilico Gallery in Rome in 1966. Curated by Marcello Fagiolo, the exhibition brought together an architect, a painter, and a sculptor. The common theme that cut across the three contributions, or the three “parables,” was about the intersection and dynamic potential of geometric form making in and around public architectural and urban spaces.\textsuperscript{18}

It turns out, however, that Parabola 66 was a fallback solution: Masini’s original intention was to make something far more multidisciplinary. At the beginning of her catalogue essay, Masini felt dissuaded from pursuing her original vision for the project:

When with Paolo Portoghesi, Enzo Mari, Cosimo Carlucci, with poets Renato Pedio and Nanni Balestrini, with electronic music composers Pietro Grossi and Vittorio Gelmetti (and we wanted to add even more names) we tried to hypothesize an interdisciplinary operation whose results would be presented in an exhibition we had in mind to organize in Florence, we realized just how much we could still risk talking about interdisciplinarity when we want to try formerly, abruptly and totally without pretensions either within the context we were already considering, with all the arts (in that case the experiment implied architecture, sculpture, programmed plastic compositions, poetry, music) …\textsuperscript{19}
This multidisciplinary collective bringing together multiple practices in the arts, media, music, architecture, and design can be interpreted here as one of the principle curatorial frameworks underpinning Masini’s visionary philosophy on the arts and architecture. Her two most significant curatorial projects, the 1978 Topologia e Morfogenesi (“Topology and Morphogenesis”) produced for the Venice Biennale, and the 1980 Umanesimo, disumanesimo in Florence are both heavily invested in transcending boundaries between artistic and architectural practices.

For the 1978 Biennale (B78) Lara-Vinca Masini was invited to the Venice Art Biennale together with Enrico Crispolti and Luigi Carluccio to collectively develop a critical vision dedicated to Italian art, but their original unified theme gave way to three very independent positions, with their own distinct narratives. Crispolti developed Natura Praticata (“Nature Practiced,” which might be translated better as “Nature Performed”), Carluccio put forth Natura come immagine (“Nature as Image”), while Masini led with the theme Topologia e morfogenesi (“Topology and Morphogenesis”). These three curatorial efforts would share the same Italian pavilion space with the international selection curated by Achille Bonito Oliva, who had come up with the pavilion’s overarching title, Utopia e crisi dell’antinatura (“Utopia and the Crisis of Anti-Nature”).

The difficult job of resolving these disparate curatorial visions within this one space was assigned by Achille Bonito Oliva to Piero Sartogo, known for having designed the display for the groundbreaking exhibition in Rome also curated by Oliva (the 1973 Contemporanea, where Sartogo re-envisioned the newly completed underground parking garage by the architect Luigi Moretti). In Venice, for the Italian Pavilion, Sartogo introduced a “virtual” grid, which he overlaid throughout the building, using segmented walls and ceiling and floor markings to organize the many artists’ interventions. Sartogo further distinguished the three sections through his selection of materials, organic wood for Natura Praticata, Venetian plaster for Natura come immagine, and concrete for Topologia e morfogenesi.

But unexpectedly midway through the planning process, Masini was asked by the Biennale commission to expand her exhibition on the visual arts to include a separate section on Italian architecture in another venue at the Magazzini di Sale (the Salt Warehouses). Masini had no reservations about expressing her annoyance at having to work out this unexpected request. But, as she goes on to note in her catalogue introduction, she ended up accepting the challenge to work on a second, architectural venue, “to demonstrate how the visual arts and architecture could be shown in reciprocal manner.”

The exhibition morphed, nonetheless, into a conflicted survey on the schism enveloping the postmodern architecture movement. Masini’s two categories, Topology and Morphogenesis, at the Magazzini del Sale served to divide architects and their projects into two competing programs (Fig. 2). It is helpful to understand how
these two significant divisions were defined in the two principle chapter headings in Masini’s catalogue:

**TOPOLOGY:** In intuitive terms (…) the meaning of “topology” is assumed in the relationship with the anthropological and sociological situation, like the search for mental “territories,” utopian, not controlled and discriminated upon by “systems” (disciplinary, professional, aesthetic…), and implicates ideology, the process of history and its calculated errors and judgment.²⁴

**MORPHOGENESIS:** The form does not develop itself in an autonomous manner, but is the result of the interaction between genetic code (project), laws of natural formativity, entropic characteristics, (levels of psycho-physical, relations with transformational systems) responses to more complex systems of the environment within its historical components, social political, economic anthropological… In metaphoric sense of the term it applies itself, as reference, to all types of architectonic re-foundation…²⁵

Masini stuck to her original intent to match these categories to their respective artistic and architectural expressions, giving examples in her catalogue text of both artists and architects whom she associated with one or the other philosophical position. Her original selection of artists installed in the Italian pavilion in the Giardini reflect the conceptual and the esoteric, and their work is consciously connected—though not actually intended to share the same spaces—with the architects who she considered as “existential and utopian,” or those she felt were linked to “anthropological memory” or to “future or historical archaeologies.”

But this logic did not carry through for Morphogenesis: no artists were selected for the main Italian pavilion to represent what Masini deemed to be the opposing ideological current as she had set out in her introductory essay published in the Biennale catalogue. Masini was most likely, as her introduction proclaimed, short on time to fully integrate the architectural program with the art program she was initially charged with developing.²⁶ Again, according to the catalogue intro, she accepted the late challenge to curate an important section on architecture at the *Magazzini del Sale* as a way of testing her approach.

Masini’s method was primarily conceptually based and did not lend to the opposition’s reactionary form of architecture. She was never particularly comfortable with the way she assembled the architects who made up the Morphogenesis group; Masini valued them less for their drive towards autonomy and more for their merging of formal practices within the sociopolitical historical environment.²⁷ This might have satisfied Masini’s view of their position in history, but still fell short of this group’s primary message, that these architects were staunchly reclaiming
their independence as a discipline. From inside the Magazzini del Sale, Masini’s exhibition presented a much more balanced view, where scores of architects representing the rationalist and neo-tendenza movements had ample space to exhibit their projects along with participants contributing to her section on Topologia. But in 1978, the architects gathered under the Morphogenesis label were in the ascendant and clearly not given the recognition they believed they deserved. Masini likely underestimated how deep this anti-modernist current actually went. It would be hard not to read this as a major shortcoming in Masini’s critical method, one that would come back to haunt her.
Masini’s section *Topologia and Morfogenesi* did not rise above the fray in a Biennale that in 1978 was deeply marked by strongly opposing ideologies, or what many at the time saw as an epic conflict between a waning conceptual vanguard and a rising conservative rear guard. In general “B78,” as this year’s Biennale was often referred to, solicited stern reviews in the art journals. Jan Van der Marck, writing in *Artforum*, was aware that the exhibition came too late to resuscitate the avant-garde in the face of a rising tide of neo-conservativism:

…yet since the disappearance of the avant-garde is symptomatic of an ominously growing conservatism in the arts that is bound to determine the future of this and other art events, it makes sense to pause and situate it in that broader context. Ultimately, the spirit of the times—conditioned by economic, political and historic factors, expressed by our creative community and experienced by all consumers of art—is responsible for the ups and downs in the fate of the Venice Biennale. The new conservatism is not that incidental naysaying to difficult or untried art, mostly a reflection of the popular consensus, we have come to expect from critics of the popular press.\(^\text{29}\)

While still on the “right side of history,” Masini could not reverse this changing cultural tide. Yet paradoxically, her visual arts installation in the Italian Pavilion was immortalized when her exhibit was visited in the wryly comedic film *Intelligent Vacations*, created by the comedian, actor, and director Alberto Sordi (best known for his 1954 comedic masterpiece “An American in Rome”).\(^\text{30}\) Accompanied by his stage wife Anna Longhi, playing the characters Remo and Augusta, Roman shop owners, they tour the gardens and main Italian pavilion attempting to understand the conceptual works around the biennale. Another actor, playing an unnamed critic, is followed around by a group of stone-faced visitors as he recites esoteric descriptions on the conceptual art installations before them. The couple doesn’t quite get it, but they do their best to fit in. While the scene could be read as a humorous dismissal of high art, there is a certain degree of fascination that makes this walkthrough among the artworks so memorable.\(^\text{31}\)

Two years later, Lara-Vinca Masini brought her focus back to Florence, unleashing one of the most comprehensive, groundbreaking, and controversial exhibitions to be staged in the postwar Tuscan city. *Umanesimo, Disumanesimo nell’arte Europea 1890/1980* spread itself out across several venues around Florence (Fig. 3). Its principle exhibition space was the Palagio di Parte Guelfa, but there were also ten public installations by artists and architects in and around the city center, occupying mainly Renaissance era courtyards, along with several interventions found elsewhere in the city. The germinal concept behind the exhibition grew out of a general reaction against an incessant parade of celebratory exhibitions and events on the Renaissance culture of the
Medici, productions that made no mention of the darker and more deviant aspects of Medicean rule. Masini’s title *Umanesimo, Disumanesimo* takes the word humanism and stands it on its head, creating a dialectical relationship between humanism and its opposite. The In-humanism term originates in the study of an anti-renaissance, brought forth by the historian Eugenio Battisti, who taught in Florence and was also active in the contemporary art scene. But Masini also makes sure to tie this research to Italy’s bloody street revolts, the rise of extra-parliamentary politics, and the devastating bomb attacks afflicting the peninsula during the postwar period.

A denunciation of the situation, expressed in a sense of emptiness and melancholy, deriving from the knowledge of the uselessness of action, was to be reached when history and myth were annulled into symbolism."

The show grew out of a series of discussions with Giuseppe Chiari, the Florentine Fluxus artist and musician, and Fabio Mauri, the artist and close friend of Masini, both of whom were strong skeptics of the complacent fad for Florence’s renaissance revival. As Masini emphasized in a recent interview, their meetings together brought them to formulate a complex and critical response to these clearly commercial and speculative trends, by making use of expressionist art that grew in reaction to rising German nationalism – as the vehicle to critically interrogate artistic responses to this superficially idealized society. Their choice to work in the arts, architecture, music, and philosophy was intended to demonstrate the value of an unvarnished richness in contemporary culture. By taking these critical and unsettling propositions directly into some of the most coveted of Renaissance era palaces and courtyards, Masini succeeded in hitting a major nerve in Florentine society.

Superstudio member Piero Frassinelli, selected by Masini to design and install the exhibition, came up with an “anti-perspective” staircase to the main entrance to the exhibition venue. The staircase was deformed using a forced perspective with its dimensions determined by Le Corbusier’s modulor man – recalling the Renaissance ideal on the “measure of man.” Superstudio cofounder Adolfo Natalini developed a set of Renaissance directional “signs,” bar castings based on Brunelleschi’s moldings from the Hospital of the Innocents, pointing to exhibit locations around the city. Music from the period 1890-1980 could be heard in the Palagio di Parte Guelfa when visiting a series of small rooms located within the interstices among black and white “zig zag” partitions designed to hold and display the artwork.

The most controversial part of Umanesimo, Disumanesimo was the artists’ and architects’ installations in a selection of Renaissance era palace courtyards, scattered across Florence’s historic center. Masini scouted out the courtyards in different parts of the city and assigned them to a selection of artists and architects to create installations that would connect back in very physical terms to the expressionist critique at the heart of the exhibition. Haus Rucker Co., which was founded in Vienna, created an immense freestanding “foldable” laundry rack, with large white sheets hanging out to dry (Fig. 4). The intention was that over time these would become soiled while exposed in the atmosphere, transforming the way the courtyard, (Cortile palazzo Montauti-Niccolini) would be experienced.

Hans Hollein, on the other hand, working in the Cortile Palazzo Pazzi-Quaratesi, chose to create a sort of war zone, with sandbags and barbed wire, and a row of hospital beds facing them (Fig. 5). The German artist Wolf Vostell releasing a chicken among a bed of feathers (Cortile Palagio di Parte Guelfa), the
Fig. 4. Haus Rucker Co., Laundry Racks, Palazzo Montauti-Niccolini Courtyard installation, overscale laundry racks and white sheets. (Courtesy of the Masini Archive)

Fig. 5. Hans Hollein, Palazzo Pazzi Quaratesi Courtyard installation, wartime scene: sandbags and empty beds. (Courtesy of the Masini Archive)
Austrian artist Hermann Nitsch’s pagan-like performance among slaughtered animal carcasses (Chiostro delle Obiate), and the German artist Rebecca Horn’s tearful funerary ode to the little boy painted in gold from Vasari’s history (Cortile Palazzo Frescobaldi) shocked the conservative Florentine public, who even tried to barricade the entrances to these spaces. And accounts in the local press were just as unfavorable. Though Nitsch’s work was an action and not meant to last, Vostell’s was closed down almost immediately.\(^\text{37}\)

The program also included a reflection on the destruction of Florence’s historic center, featuring Piero Frassinelli’s re-imagining the Risorgimento style central post office at Piazza Repubblica that stands on the former site of the Jewish ghetto. Frassinelli’s intervention on the nineteenth-century post office consisted of a series of hung fabrics painted with images from the Alinari photo archives, documenting the streets from the medieval era that vanished to make way for this imposing arcaded structure. There was also a comprehensive study using the Alinari archives, curated by Marco Dezzi Bardeschi, on the false restorations of Florentine Renaissance era buildings, aptly titled *Quale Firenze… Ideologia e pratica dell’infedele* (“Which Florence… Ideology and Practice of the Infidel”).

Among the projects critical of Florence’s contradictory imaginary, none would be so condemning as Fabio Mauri’s intervention at the Vasca della Palazzina Reale, located to the rear to the Santa Maria Novella rail station completed in 1934 (Fig. 6). The design of the Palazzina Reale, designated for official State visits, is attributed to the interwar era Gruppo Toscano, led by the architect Giovanni Michelucci, whose collective won the public design competition. Mauri focused in on the formal reflecting pool as it opened towards the side of the city. This end of the composition included a marble portico, seated statuary, a reflecting pool with flagpole, and a narrow exedra to the side, rendered in stripped down classicist style. The Palazzina Reale was pointedly the site for the welcoming ceremony greeting Hitler’s visit to Florence in 1938. By choosing this part of the train station, Mauri bluntly reminded Florentines of Hitler’s notorious reception in their city. The artist transformed the reflecting pool into a fountain of red tinted water, while the flagpole was draped in a long white sheet that extended into the pool, absorbing the bloodlike color like a stained bandage.

The concluding event was the conference *Valore, non-valore* (“Value, Non-Value”), a philosophical debate examining the complex legacy of humanism in Florence. Presided over by the art critic and historian Giulio Carlo Argan, the published list of speakers included Giuseppe Chiari, Fabio Mauri, and Hans Hollein, together with critics and historians Marco Dezzi Bardeschi, Gillo Dorfles, Achille Bonito Oliva, Pierre Restany, and Lea Vergine, among others. Florentines stayed away while the audience, mainly from outside Florence and beyond flocked to the event. If one looked past the local dissent, *Valore, non-valore* should be considered as
one of the most important gatherings of intellectuals to be organized in the city’s postwar history.

In one opinion from 1980 published in the conservative newspaper *Il Giornale*, the reviewer, Pier Carlo Santini, writes, “The exhibition in its totality is organized by Lara-Vinca Masini, who is not new to this kind of undertaking, it is meant ‘to rupture’…” From the other perspective, writing in the left-wing paper *La Repubblica*, Valerio Eletti observes, “the show is a must see, an ‘intelligent’ exhibit curated by Lara-Vinca Masini that from the start is in polemic with the pompous excesses of the (previous) exhibit on the Medici, by taking the lead to excavate in the art of the last century the values of the ‘negative’.”

The impressive collective effort to embed the exhibition into the physical and psychic landscapes of Florence did not have the desired effect, in the end, of swaying Florentines into becoming more critically aware of their city’s questionable past. According to Masini, were it not for a few local educational classes and a stream of foreign visitors, there was very little public presence. Masini knew this project would be a provocation, but nonetheless she had not anticipated the degree to which Florentines would react negatively. *Umanesimo, Disumanesimo* was nonetheless a ground-breaking exhibition, and as of this writing there is renewed interest in revisiting its history. But it is also evident that Florentines remain far too beholden to the city’s historic legacy and its unidimensional tourist economy to
embrace innovation in the arts and architecture, at least in the way Masini envisioned it.

Masini’s long and prestigious legacy as a critic and curator seems to have fallen short of achieving the kind of international stature that someone with such noteworthy accomplishments would normally merit. As in Venice in 1978, and in Florence in 1980, Masini always carefully tailored her projects to a specific question through a very personal applied philosophy, pioneering a curatorial style that did not conform to one or another predetermined position. She was constantly seeking out expressions that reflected the issues she was most concerned with, rather than formulating a signature style or pursuing greater prominence. But whereas her capacity to weave together art and architecture and her concern for operating in the public realm set her outside the emerging trends of the eighties, there are clear, if somewhat indirect signals that Masini anticipated a long-term shift towards critical artistic and architectural interventions in the contemporary city. In other words, Lara-Vinca Masini seems to have intuited a working method concerned with criticizing public perceptions of the urban condition, a site-specific approach to cities that would increasingly concern curators over the coming decades.

For example, the famed urban sociologist and pedagogue Lucius Burckhardt participated in a project called the Biennale Urbana – a series of housing initiatives based in Kassel in the early 80s. Burckhardt wanted to intervene in public spaces of the inner city and succeeded in folding his project by 1982 into Documenta 7. The initiative led to a myriad of urban-based proposals for Kassel’s center city. Yet it may not have been until the Dutch curator Hedwig Fijen established the Manifesta organization in the early nineties that something similar to what Lara-Vinca Masini had been pursuing began to take more recognizable shape. Fijen speaks about using a trans-disciplinary model in pulling together their biennial curatorial teams, and in Manifesta 9 she “introduced the trans-historical model” that Fijen describes as “a method in which curators make interventions in a historical context, and start-up a dialog between contemporaneity and the historical.” Not only does this sound very familiar, but the problems that Hedwig Fijen’s curatorial teams encountered reflect working obstacles similar to those often faced by Masini. This would become most evident when Manifesta 6 came to Cyprus, where government intransigence effectively shut the biennial down. “That’s what I am a little bit proud of,” Fijen observed, “that we saw an opportunity for the curators to innovate, to experiment. And specifically, how can you do an experiment which is actually even able to fail?”

The brilliance of Masini springs from her ability to produce exhibitions that are about activating spaces, getting artists, architects, and designers to respond viscerally to the environment in which they are set, by creating critical projects that are at once contaminated and contaminating. Other exhibitions curated by architectural
critics from the same period tended to pursue more constrained objectives. Take for example Bruno Zevi’s exhibition from 1978, *Brunelleschi anti-classico*, which occupied the cloisters of Santa Maria Novella in Florence. Zevi introduced large scale installations designed by Piero Sartogo that were meant to upend existing tropes about Brunelleschi’s understanding of geometry and modularity.\(^{45}\)

The exhibition by Zevi can be taken as a historical corrective, providing through its carefully articulated narrative an alternative account on Brunelleschi’s prescient architectural development. But the exhibition, besides amplifying the architect’s position as lone genius, leaves little for interpretation. Zevi did not probe deeper into the vicissitudes of Florentine society; nor did he question how Brunelleschi would be interpreted by his peers and successors.

Masini, on the other hand, would not have missed the opportunity to take such an inquiry further afield, as she went on to do two years later when she came down hard on the glorified celebrations of Medici Florence. To Masini, these previous exhibitions exalting the figures and architecture of the Renaissance would merely play into the hands of those whose livelihoods were most dependent on the city’s highly profitable tourist trade. Lara-Vinca Masini fought long and hard to keep Florence from becoming an urban boutique, and she made quite a number of enemies along the way. But the lingering question is whether Masini fell short as a critic, and whether her vision would be able to stand the test of time. There I think the answer is more nuanced, depending largely on how narrowly architecture is defined as a form of creative expression. Masini took the broad perspective, and we should give her view renewed consideration.

**Notes**

2. Lara Vinca Masini spoke in an interview of her close relations to Ettore Sottsass Jr. and Nanda Pivana (interview by author, September 26, 2016).
3. Petition on behalf of LVM 2016 (https://www.artribune.com/professioni-e-professionisti/didattica/2016/12/lara-vinca-masini-appello-gentiloni-franceschini-vitalizio/). The Livorno project should have had its equivalent in Florence, but Masini never could overcome the provincial resistance she encountered in her effort to make a modern museum of art in Florence.
4. From start to finish, the latter exhibition was largely scorned by mainstream Florentine society despite being well received outside the city and beyond. Alessandra Acocella, “Un itinerario urbano per ripensare Firenze, *Umanesimo, Disumanesimo nell’arte europea*


7. For example, as documented by Alessandra Acocella, Masini would be instrumental in arranging for a major retrospective of the work of Ketty La Rocca at the Venice Biennale in 1978, though as La Rocca worked in a photographic medium, for Masini it made more sense for it to be exhibited in the section curated by Luigi Carluccio. Cited in Alessandra Acocella, “Tra utopia e disincanto. Le mostre di Lara-Vinca Masini alla Biennale 1978,” in Presenze toscane alla Biennale Internazionale d’Arte di Venezia, ed. Flavio Fergonzi (Milan: Skira, 2017), 135.


10. Interview with Piero Sartogo by author, June 20, 2017, Rome. While there were repeated contacts with Austrian architects by the late sixties, specifically in Graz during the Trigon and at Alvin Boyarsky’s IID in London, it would be Lara-Vinca Masini who would organize the first serious exhibitions of their work in Florence in 1980 in her exhibition on Humanism.

11. Interview with Lara-Vinca Masini by author, July 29, 2003, Florence. “While before architects used art like some appendix, I think what today we call shifts, or contaminations, comes out of this…this is the impact of the radicals…Today so much architecture reflects the world of art. And vice a versa so many artists are working on space…It’s not that one becomes the other but that there is this shift, this exchange, from the sciences, and poetry.”

12. Masini’s commitment to interdisciplinarity reflects the core values that shaped Florence after the war, beginning in the 1950s, when Giorgio La Pira assumed the city mayor’s office, introducing in the process a pious form of humanist government. In the years that ensued, the city would host world film festivals, promote international cultural exchanges, and lead an effort towards global peace. One of La Pira’s capstones was bringing the European University Institute to Florence. “La Pira, Communities of Europe and the World: Foundation Stones of Dialogue,” posted November 2014, European University Institute, https://www.eui.eu/Research/HistoricalArchivesOfEU/News/2014/11-04-LaPiracommunitiesofEuropeandtheworldfoundationstonesofdialogue.


15. Lombardi, “Lara Vinca Masini e la critica d’arte a Firenze,” 64.


17. Some of the more outstanding essays included Renato De Fusco on the teaching of modern architecture, Lara-Vinca Masini on a proposal for a new critical language, Filiberto Menna on *Architettura Programmat*ta*, and Vittorio Gregotti’s* *Fruition and Significance*, to name but a few.

18. The painter Marcolino Gandini’s geometrically generated frescoes were fused to large freestanding concrete slabs set in unremarkable urban peripheries; the sculptor Cosimo Carlucci’s outdoor works were made of multilayered overlapping space-age aluminum wings that reflected the sky and channeled the wind, while Paolo Portoghesi presented highly intricate geometrically shaped buildings with their study sketches. See Catalogue: Marcello Faggiolo, ed., *Parabola 66* (Florence: Edizione centro proposte, 1966). *Parabola 66* includes essays by Giulio Carlo Argan, Marcello Fagiolo, and Lara-Vinca Masini.


20. “The theme Anti-natura was not my theme but was introduced by Achille Bonito Oliva.” Interview with Lara-Vinca Masini by author, July 29, 2003, Florence.


25. Quoted from Masini’s blurb on the chapter “Morphogenesis.” Ibid., 103, translated by author. Especially telling were the contributions by those who were leading the *neo-ten-
denza movement, with fundamental texts by Giorgio Grassi, Vittorio Gregotti, Franco Purini, Constantino Dardi, Carlo Aymonino, Manfredo Tafuri, Aldo Rossi, Massimo Scolari, Bruno Reichlin, Fabio Reinhart, Mario Botta, and Aduino Cantafora.

27. Masini, Topologia e Morfogenesi, 11.
28. See Léa-Catherine Szacka, Exhibiting the Postmodern: The 1980 Venice Architecture Biennale (Venice: Marsilio Editore, 2017). Szacka gives the most detailed history to date on the first independent Architecture Biennale in Venice, “The Presence of the Past,” curated by Paolo Portoghesi, held in 1980. This exhibit was dominated by the very same group of eclectic postmodernists.
30. Stefano Vanzina (Steno) Titanus, Un Americano a Roma (Rome: Minerva Film, 1954), film starring Alberto Sordi.
34. Interview with Lara-Vinca Masini by author, September 26, 2016, Florence.
35. A short list of artists in the exhibition provides a sense of Lara Vinca Masini’s Dionsysian vision: Kazimir Malevich, Henri Fauconnier, Erich Mendelsohn, Piero Manzoni, Constant, Fernandez Arman, Oskar Kokoschka, Egon Schiele, Marcel Duchamp, Raul Hausman, Meret Oppenheim, Frederick Kiesler, Jean Debuffet, Frei Otto, Asger Jorn, Giacometti, Franz Roh …
37. The full list of courtyard installations are as follows: Sandro Chia, Giuseppe Chiari, Luciano Fabro, Haus-Rucker-Co, Hans Hollein, Rebecca Horn, Fabio Mauri, Hermann Nitsch, and Wolf Vostell.
41. Ibid.
42. An excellent exhibition was recently displayed at the Villa Romana in Florence curated by Alessandra Acocella and Angelika Stepken, entitled Umanesimo Disumanesimo 1980/2017: Lara-Vinca Masini e il senso della crisi nell’arte europea, 9.11-15.12.2017,


44. Ibid.
