

↗ Session 5 (1992–1993)
Interview by Benedetta Lucherini
by Lore Gablier
28.02.2022

Lore Gablier: To start, could you please introduce yourself and tell me how you heard about the programme of the École du Magasin and what was the incentive to join?

Benedetta Lucherini: My name is Benedetta Lucherini. I was advised to apply to the École du Magasin, which I attended in 1992-1993 at the time when Adelina von Fürstenberg was artistic director, by Achille Bonito Oliva who was my professor during the last year of my studies at the university. At the beginning, I was studying Egyptian and ancient art but then, the lessons of Achille Bonito Oliva really made me change my mind and we stayed close friends. After I graduated, I moved to New York to work at the Annina Nosei gallery, which is a very established Italian gallery. It was located in SOHO, and at the time, SOHO was not the shopping street that it has become but a center for art galleries. Annina needed an assistant and she contacted me because my aunt is an important Italian collector. And so, I went there and worked as a “shadow”: a non-paid assistant. I stayed with her for five years, living in New York — growing as a woman and as a professional in the art field. Annina has a loft close to the gallery where she was hosting artists, curators, and myself. I had the chance to meet everyone and Achille Bonito Oliva was coming very often. And he told me: “You will not be anybody in the art field because you went too early in New York. You don’t have any Italian background, artists who can follow you. You will always be the assistant of someone.” He then mentioned that he had been invited by Adelina von Fürstenberg to be part of the jury of the École and suggested that I apply. I agreed. It was a big change for me because I was working in a big city and I had to go live in Grenoble. I was already earning money in New York because I was selling a lot of paintings, so my life there was easy and developing. Therefore, coming back to a provincial city and not earning money anymore, having to sleep in the dormitory of the Magasin and speak French: that was a big change. I remember being on the train on my way for my entry interview and I was shocked.

LG: Do you remember your interview? What was the selection process at the time?

BL: It was like a university exam. There were a lot of people, including Achille Bonito Oliva, Nicholas Serota, Alain-Julien Laferrière who was the director of the museum in Tours, Laura Cherubini, an important Italian curator, and Adelina. The funny story was that when they saw on my curriculum that I had been working with Annina for five years, they said: “You must have a lovely character to work there for so long!” Annina is known for not being so easy... They laughed and said: “Just for this you are in.” They also asked me questions about contemporary art, about my views. It was not a difficult exam: more like an “art” chat.

LG: So, you didn't have to prepare anything else besides your CV and motivation letter?

BL: No. They wanted to understand your level of culture. And then, I was accepted. We were nine girls and one guy, Pau, who was traveling back and forth and was thus not often there. Imagine nine girls! And only one of us would be chosen to continue working at Le Magasin afterward. There were people from Switzerland and Spain, but most of us were from Italy, mostly from Milan. It was a difficult situation in private, but the cultural atmosphere was very lively because everyone was very witty and active. It was a great group. Adelina gave her best: she treated us like daughters, not like students. And she offered us great opportunities. We met the most important directors from European museums. Nicholas Serota came back several times, and so did Achille. It was really a pool of intellectuals coming to visit. Adelina was not only the director of Le Magasin: she was so much inside the artistic. Her house was crowded with artists. We would go to the École and then to Adelina's house and we would continue to talk to the people who came to give classes, but this time we would cook together. We would also have dinner at her place with the artists invited to make exhibitions. It was a never-ending school: an art community. We wanted to give our best and we were all different.

As part of the École's program, there was an internship. Adelina would not impose placements but would tell us: "Let's try to make your dream come true." At the time, one of the main art magazines was *Parkett*. Two of us applied for an internship there. I personally was not so interested in writing but a lot of us wanted to write about art. I chose to do my internship in London. It was about being a "shadow" at the Tate Gallery, which was presenting a survey exhibition of the work of Robert Gober; afterward, I worked for one week at the Serpentine Gallery which was showing Gober's last work; and finally, I spent one week at the Whitechapel, which at the time was an underground art space. I was staying at the apartment of one of the students of the École. And it was great: I met the art scene in London and had the opportunity to get to know three very different art venues—an art institution, a private gallery, and an alternative art space. So, the École was more like a "school of life" rather than a formal education.

At the time, Achille was curating the exhibition *Aperto* at the Venice Biennale. And he asked us to be his "angels". I was the one appointed to work directly with him. I stayed in Venice for three months and stayed at the place of one of Adelina's friends because the École could not cover accommodation. Achille wanted me to be involved also in the *Aperto* exhibition catalogue, published by Flash Art. The experience at the Venice Biennale was the best I could ever have expected from the École. And then, when the École was over, Adelina proposed me to stay and work with her.

LG: So, at the time, the program was structured around visiting lecturers and internships.

BL: Artists, curators, artist directors would come to meet us. And when nobody would come, Adelina would teach us something—about the artistic scene in Greece, Armenia, Turkey. Actually, our main focus with Adelina was the Mediterranean sea and the importance of the Mediterranean basin from the Greeks onwards. One of the closest friends of Adelina was Fulvio Salvadori who has since passed away. He was a fantastic writer and philosopher, with a great heart. All the Italian artists

loved him. He gave us a lot of lectures about the Mediterranean— he had just published a book on the subject.¹ He introduced us to Platon, Heidegger; we read Cavafy’s poetry. I really loved his lectures. He was able to weave together contemporary art, philosophy, ancient Greece... He was our angel in Grenoble.

LG: Was this focus on the Mediterranean sustained throughout the year?

BL: Yes, it was the third component of the program, besides the meetings we had with art professionals and our internships. The whole program was more a way of opening up our minds. At the end of the year, we did a kind of book, and all of us were writing a chapter. It was a kind of thesis book and all of us were invited to elaborate on their experience or on something important they learned during the programme. I chose a poem by Cavafy, “Waiting for the Barbarians”, which I think is a great metaphor for life.

LG: You also curated an exhibition together, didn’t you?

BL: We did, but I wasn’t there myself. I was already working with Flash Art in Milano. Therefore, I missed that part. The experience of the École I had was perhaps a little different from the others: I didn’t want to be a student. I became very close to Adelina and was lucky enough to befriend Éric [Binnert] and Axel who were the exhibition builders. I became friends with this true French group of people and we went skiing. Even Grenoble became easy for me.

The exhibition that was being built was the skeleton of Gino de Dominicis which was something truly powerful; and then, it was followed by an exhibition of Alighiero Boetti: two Italian artists I know well. It was fantastic!

LG: When the École started in 1987, they would not speak of curator but of “médiateur”: was it still the case during your time?

BL: No, it was curator.

LG: How was this figure perceived? How would it be approached at the École?

BL: It was a full experience: the curator is not only someone who writes—who has a head—but someone who has a heart and relations with the artists in primis, with the institution after. Adelina tried to teach us the totality—including budgeting and fundraising—without ever imposing what she thought a curator should do or what choice they should make. Our internship was exactly about that as well: going in the field and learning.

LG: That’s interesting because what you describe relates to the curator as producer and not to the curator as an author—as they eventually would be perceived later on.

BL: I think it was like that because for Adelina there is no difference between life and art: if you are connected with the artist’s thoughts, the exhibition will be great because you will understand each other. The difficult part was the budget and sponsorship.

LG: What was the art scene in France at the time?

BL: We did travel a lot during our time at the École. We went to Tours to visit the museum. We also went to Nice, which had a great art scene. We visited a lot of artist studios there and met with Philippe Parreno and Sylvie Fleury. Felix Gonzalez-Torres was also there.

LG: So the programme of the École was more about connections and how to make the most of them: building relationships, going out there, opening up your mind.

BL: That's how it was. At least, that's how I experienced it. And it fits my character. I'm sure if you ask someone else from my session, you'll get a different perspective.

LG: Do you think it would still be possible to organise such a programme?

BL: This is my way of working, so I think it's something [she doesn't finish her sentence]...

LG: Earlier on, you insisted on the fact that you needed to find solutions, for instance in terms of accommodation. And it's true: the École has never had a huge budget.

BL: We were all helping each other—Adelina the first. Some were good at writing, others at building relationships with artists or at organising and planning. I lived the École as an experience. Curating was taught in a practical and living way. Museums taught us more than books and lectures.

1. Fulvio Salvadori, Jean-Pierre Cometti, *Méditerranée, la voie de l'Occident* (Grenoble; Venice: Centre national d'art contemporain; Monastero di San Lazzaro, 1993).