

In 1973,

*a slogan which paraphrased that dogmatic biblical verse appeared on half the world's billboards to promote Jesus Jeans. Their creator and promoter was Emanuele Pirella along with the then already provocative Oliviero Toscani.*

*When we explained to Mr. Toscani the theme of this issue, advancing timidly the desire to obtain an interview, he didn't hesitate: "Yes!" — he said us when we reached him via phone in his office in Cecina — "How do you want to arrange it?" Mr. Toscani is a resolute man, with clear ideas and a strong temperament. Could it have been any other way?*



## A free communicator

*interview with Oliviero Toscani  
by Luca Imbimbo*

*"Chi mi ama mi segua (Who loves me, follows me)"*

*Portrait by Stefano Beggato.*

He always had the courage to say what he thought. He has never been carried away by the current, swimming against it with increasing vigour. He didn't do it for mere spirit of contradiction. He did it to give shape and substance to his values, to those ideas intrinsic in his condition. He, a beginner who at first had the courage, or perhaps the intuition, to transform fashion into a tool to launch a message, especially a social one. He did it through the multi-year collaboration with Elle France. He did it through the ambitious project Fabrica. He did it through the partnership with United Colors of Benetton. For almost twenty years (1982-2000) his campaigns have been a guiding light for the outsider of the system, substantially contributing to the success of the historic Italian brand. Anorexia, hunger and racial discrimination are just some of the themes debated without compromise.

It's been 43 years since that distant 1973. Mr. Toscani's path was long, sometimes tortuous, always stimulating. He doesn't do evaluations, he is too pragmatic. He prefers to think about the future. About a future where technology is already in the past and innovation is represented by us and our humanity. The future is in the possibility granted to each of us to be free. The future is in our ability to communicate: through a gesture, through a look, through an image... simple and extremely powerful.

**Fucking Young! — Outsider is the theme of this issue. We chose and strongly desired to interview you because you can be rightly defined as such. Who's the outsider today?**

*Oliviero Toscani* — The outsider isn't just a possibility. I feel like an outsider because I am free, free from the limits that would give me a boss, an editor, a

client, a policy membership, a nationality. For example, if one day I had to go to battle — and I hope there isn't ever the need — I'll do it for whom I decide to do it, not for my country. I'm an outsider in this sense. The only thing that I have to admit, and that represents a sense of belonging, is to have a father and a mother and, therefore, to be son. Now that they are dead I am no longer even that.

**FY! — What about through your lens? What is or becomes the outsider?**

*Oliviero Toscani* — In my personal interpretation, to be an outsider means not belonging to fashions and conventions, trends and even approval. I'm not interested in approval. If you receive approval, you aren't an outsider, you are integrated. I always say: "When everyone agrees with me, I start to think I'm wrong".

**FY! — You mentioned your personal story and your parents before. Your father was one of the first photojournalists for the Corriere della Sera. It is probably from him that you inherited the aimed and rough photography. Fashion became an instrument for you to deliver a message sincerely. If you go against the current, you do it with awareness, not for the mere spirit of contradiction. What is the link between fashion and social issues?**

*Oliviero Toscani* — There is a big problem. All tend, I mean most of those who aren't outsiders, to lose sight of the end for the means. Just to be integrated, they lose sight of the reason why they do something. What to do should be the point. How to do it is an instrument. Another example: everyone spends time on computers but not everyone knows what they want to achieve in the end. They get lost in the composition, the colour balance, the form, the

aesthetic. Why? To say what? The only purpose of an artist must and should be to explain the human condition. The nude civilisations have never done culture. We started to produce culture when we started covering our genitals with the fig leaf. From that moment, we started to have social relationships. Why wear the fig leaf? Why wear the burka? In my opinion, the burka and the fig leaf are the same thing. After all, no woman goes around with her ass out. We all have a burka, the real point is "how much". Or rather, today the real burka is represented by the fashion brands.

Back to us, since we started to dress we began to live in a polis. Therefore, I'm convinced that fashion depends a lot on the need to live in a society organised according to rules. When Mary Quant invented the miniskirt, it was not simply for aesthetic reasons. It was a mental and physical liberation of women, a social liberation. The more you are a slave to the system, the more you are forced to dress in a certain way: the soldier must wear a uniform, one who goes to the Queen's dinner must dress according to the etiquette, one who wishes to enter a church must wear a headscarf. Free people dress as they want.

**FY! — The Razza Umana project is a tribute to human beings: who are both alike and different from each other simultaneously. What did you intend to tell us?**

*Oliviero Toscani* — It's also a tribute to a certain aesthetic. I don't photograph naked people - naked people don't interest me. Naked people don't tell me about a culture. Razza Umana has two objectives. The first is to photograph the inner self, the soul of the people through their eyes. The second is to demonstrate that there

are no two identical people in the world, no one is really ugly, that each of us is an artwork. Unfortunately, society foolishly finds beauty in very few places. Everyone is able to see the beauty in beautiful things. The desire is to make people understand that beauty is something broader, much more interesting, that there is beauty in tragedy too.

**FY! — We talked about looks. What must a look have to push you to photograph it?**

*Oliviero Toscani* — It must have a flow. If you look someone in the eye you can feel it, it is like hydraulics. It's the human flow, its interiority that in some people comes out in a particular way. To be able to enter into a connection and understand this sympathy, this empathy allows you to see the beholder. It is no coincidence that we find it hard to look into the eyes of someone because there is this flow that makes us nude.

**FY! — You taught Visual Communication at various Italian universities. It's a discipline — if it can be called such — constantly evolving under the pressure of new media and the market. How and how much it has changed and how it will change again?**

*Oliviero Toscani* — We must realise that almost 100% of what we know, we know it because we have seen photos. It's through the photos that we have seen and we see now. It's through the photos that we also form opinions about things and people. You, for example, have never seen Barack Obama or Matteo Renzi in person, but you would recognise them if you met them. You also have a personal opinion about them. This is a mediated knowledge, possible thanks to images taken by someone else. Now reality is much more real through photos than through true reality.



All we say about war, we are afraid, but no one has really experienced a war. We live in a world that I don't call virtual. It is just a world of images, without images reality would not exist. In school, we learn to read and write but not to interpret images which is, instead, the most powerful form of writing of the contemporary era. I would define it, at least, as strange. There is a way to read images, like for art and cinema. It should be deciphered, understood, weighed and it's for this reason that we need an education.

**FY! — What could the system be?**

*Oliviero Toscani* — The system should be taught from kindergarten. This would prevent us from being shocked by a photo. Photos are not there to shock: that isn't how it should be. Rather, it's the events that the photos capture that are shocking. You have to understand that the photos are the mere documentation of reality, facts and events that surround us.

**FY! — Coming to your partnership with Benetton or, more precisely, with United Colors of Benetton (1982-2000) that has internationally consecrated you. Can you speak about it? How much has the brand given you and how much have you given the brand?**

*Oliviero Toscani* — It's like for an architect. We speak and we spoke about the photos of Benetton, but Benetton, understood as a company, has never taken a photo. Actually, it's Oliviero Toscani's photography that allowed Benetton to be known around the world. On the other hand, we have to say that there was a company that allowed and encouraged a similar action. The sense of all this resides in one word: faith. My faith in the company and the faith of the multinational in my



work. I have just done what I can do. However, I must say that I work in the same way for all my clients. We speak of Benetton because it was certainly the most mediated and, consequently, is the best known. But we could speak about Elle France with which I have collaborated beautifully for forty years, or more.

Benetton have given me the opportunity to have a purpose that was not simply selling a sweater. It allowed me to tackle more interesting themes that have helped them to sell the sweater in question too. Without this compromise I could not have continued to do what I did. No advertising agency has ever allowed it. I can do it because I am a free man, I haven't an agency... I'm an outsider. I am a performer, I'm like a singer concentrating on his performance.

Do you remember which Pope commissioned Michelangelo to fresco the Sistine Chapel? Sixtus IV, but no one remembers his name. Concretely, the Sistine Chapel is property of the Vatican, but in the human conscience it's Michelangelo's. However, Sixtus IV realised that it was essential that Michelangelo make the Sistine Chapel what it was and is.

**FY! — Fabrica is a creative research centre about modern communication that you founded in 1991. A hotbed of experimentation, over the years it has become a reference point for those who aspire to be innovative. Here, the term innovation is frequently misused. According to you, what is innovation? How can we continue to be innovative?**

*Oliviero Toscani* — I think it's a necessity. The problem today is that a lot of people think that innovation depends on technology. Technology is not innovative. Technology is always

a magazine about the rest of the world una rivista che parla del resto del mondo

# COLORS n.7

# AIDS

Let's talk about fashion.  
Let's talk about sex.  
Let's talk about death.  
Let's really talk about Aids.

Parliamo di moda.  
Parliamo di sesso.  
Parliamo di morte.  
Parliamo di AIDS.

Arg:3pesos Aus:4AS BRD:DM6.50 Can:4CS Esp:400PTAS Fr:25FF Hellas:750DR HK:HK\$25 India:Rs.100 Ire:IR£2 Italc:L5.000 Mag:250FT Mex:95 Nederl:5.5FL Port:520\$00 S.A.:9R UK:£2 USA:\$3.00

old while innovation requires imagination. Imagination has nothing to do with technology. Ergo, if you want to look to the future you must imagine. If you want to look to the past, technology is perfect. Technology allows us to see, to bring everything to the present.

**FY! — Fashion, photography, art and business - a modern equation in which each factor interacts, to a certain extent, with the other. How does this interaction take place, and how will it do so in the coming years?**

*Oliviero Toscani* — Each thing needs the other and everything happens through communication. Design is a form of communication. Writing is a form of communication: depending on whether you put a full stop or a comma you want to express different things. We need to realise this. We need to become good at using communication. We are not good enough. Communication 'stutters', people are not able to express themselves. Communication is primitive. The more we go on and the more we know, the more illiterate we are. The more we go on and the more connected we are, the less we communicate.

**FY! — From the UNESCO Grand Prix to the four Golden Lion in Venice. From the two Gran Premio d’Affichage to the Creative Hero prize of Saatchi & Saatchi. You’ve received many awards in the course of a more than fifty-year career. Which of these, and other, moments do you remember with the most pleasure or emotion?**

*Oliviero Toscani* — I recently received an email from a girl named Bianca. At sixteen, she was anorexic. Incidentally, in 2006 I made a film called Bianca, 16 anni. Anyway, the doctors gave Bianca up for dead, she weighed thirty kilos. Her email read something like this:





“Mr. Toscani, this is Bianca and I’m pregnant. I’m healed. I have to thank you for what you did for me when I was sick. You saved my life”. That is the best award I’ve ever received. Between the lines, she added that if the baby was a boy, his name would be Oliviero, but it turned out to be a girl.

**FY! — Among your hundreds of photos and historical campaigns, which would you choose as your favourite?**

*Oliviero Toscani — Hand With Rice (1989).*