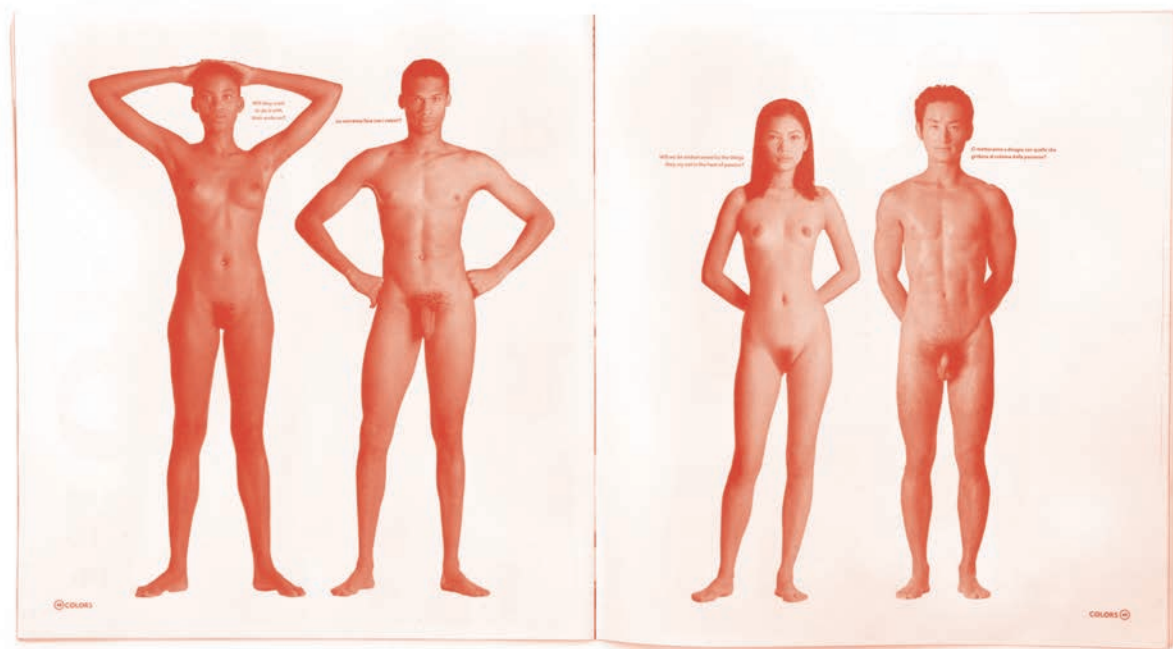


“MAYBE
WE COULD
INTERVIEW
ANDY
WARHOL”

An interview with Oliviero Toscani

Let's start at the beginning. Why did *COLORS* begin? Was it created at the beginning of the 1990s because it was thought something was missing or to shake up a dormant collective imagination?

I really don't know! I don't do social stuff! *COLORS* took physical form in the '90s but for me it had been created at least twenty years earlier. I've always wanted to have my own paper and I hope that one day that will come about. In short order, it became clear after some preliminary discussion that I might be able to do this with Benetton as they had a budget to publish a magazine and were looking to do so.



And more importantly, while other publications avoided printing my images because they felt my work was too provocative, Benetton was willing to take a chance on me – a chance which turned out to be *Fabrica* and *COLORS*.

When I told Luciano (Benetton) that I would like to do something, I didn't immediately suggest to him that we produce a paper, but rather an in-house publication that would talk about the employees, after work-hours activities, *Formula 1*, sports teams, the company! He immediately caught on that I had different ideas and said, "Yes, let's do it. For him too it was a sort of game and he needed to justify the investment required. And that's also how *Fabrica* came about. They were created at the same time because my idea was to make *Fabrica* a publication, to take advantage of this great chance seeing that the money was already allocated for company communications. I have to say that

Luciano realized that it could be an excellent form of communication, for the brand.

Fabrica was created on the basis of *cutting and sewing*: that was how Francesca Mattei, my stylist presented it. Benetton and the sweaters... At Fabrica we research the materials and the styles... I knew it wouldn't be like that; I knew what I wanted to do and what Fabrica should do. And I also knew very well how *COLORS* needed to be. I had very clear ideas. I wanted a magazine without any stars, without any celebrities and without any news. That was crazy enough already because all magazines feature celebrities, news and current affairs. I wanted current events but the kind of things we have no power over, issues that never go away. I wanted a paper that would be different every month, surprising and moving in form and substance, even if this went right against the publishing industry's marketing logic. To begin with, my first idea was a title that "hitchhiked" on other papers.

I said to Luciano: "Let's do an issue this month for *National Geographic*, next month for *La Repubblica* and for *Le Monde* the month after". We had a certain buying power and were able to give them a title to distribute for us, thus a magazine hitching on others. I had also thought that we could call it *Cucù* because cuckoos lay their eggs in other birds' nests so their chicks are brought up by other birds. I liked this idea and stuck to it for a while. I also wanted it to be printed in different formats. Once like the *New York Times*, another time large like *National Geographic*. A title completely different from all the others, made up of intersections between pictures and text. This was the idea to sell it to a publisher.

It couldn't have a fixed central office, it had to be stateless. The right city to start it in was New York where there are more possibilities available. We had everything going for us, we weren't unknowns. I went to New York and in two weeks carried out a series of interviews with people who would be useful to making this magazine. I met friends and acquaintances from when I lived in the city and Carlo [Tunioli] gave me a hand. We were informed, we knew loads of interesting people, we knew who did what. Lou Reed would have been a cool person to collaborate with, but I had to work within the realms of realistic expectations. In the end it was Tibor Kalman who was chosen. I wasn't particularly a fan of his graphics and his rather retro, Forties-Fifties design but what I liked about him was his intelligence. He couldn't write or draw but my concern was to have someone with a head for being the editor-in-chief. He was quick and had a kind of off-kilter feel. My aspiration and vision for *COLORS* was to make it eccentrically intelligent, a little different from the idiotic marketing world.

We began it in New York. It was very difficult at first because Tibor didn't really know what he was doing. He arrived on the job from *Interview*, a very snobbish and hip magazine and kept saying "It has to be hip" but I kept on repeating

that I didn't want a fashionable title. I wanted a different theme each issue. The theme was like an avenue into which different streets lead and each street had to bring news and interest based on the issue's chosen theme.

I didn't want experienced journalists, I wanted youngsters who had just started out; I didn't want anything that was like what was already known. For example, the captions of the photos couldn't be descriptive of what was seen, for example, if there was a picture of someone playing football, we couldn't write "Giovanni playing football". Of course not. But something like "Giovanni would like to be an architect and instead he plays football". This was a difficult process. For the first two months I had a hard time. I gave people a hard time, I was demanding, they hated me. I was in New York but I said to myself, "Now I'll leave. I'll give them time to settle". I wasn't interested in doing interviews. They came up with ideas for interviews, saying "Maybe we could interview Andy Warhol," but I had no interest in doing that. *People* magazine does interviews. We had to interview people whom nobody knew. It had to be interesting for exactly that reason, we had to find things that didn't make the news, we had to turn our things into news. All the odd, off-the-wall sports. We did a whole series of politically incorrect stuff, completely wrong by the standards of traditional journalism. We searched out photographs that nobody was publishing and news that wasn't really news at all but that became news if *COLORS* published it. Like toilet-throwing in Scotland. I remember using it as an example. I arrived with this photo and everyone said "You're crazy, a toilet-hurling contest?!" But it marked the start of a series of alternative articles. We didn't want to make the world a better place, at least I never did. I didn't want to demonstrate anything, all I wanted – egotistically – was to publish my own magazine. To see if what I had thought for years could be done.

**How was the writing organized?
How much time did it take?
How many people were there
internally and how many outsiders
sent in news?**

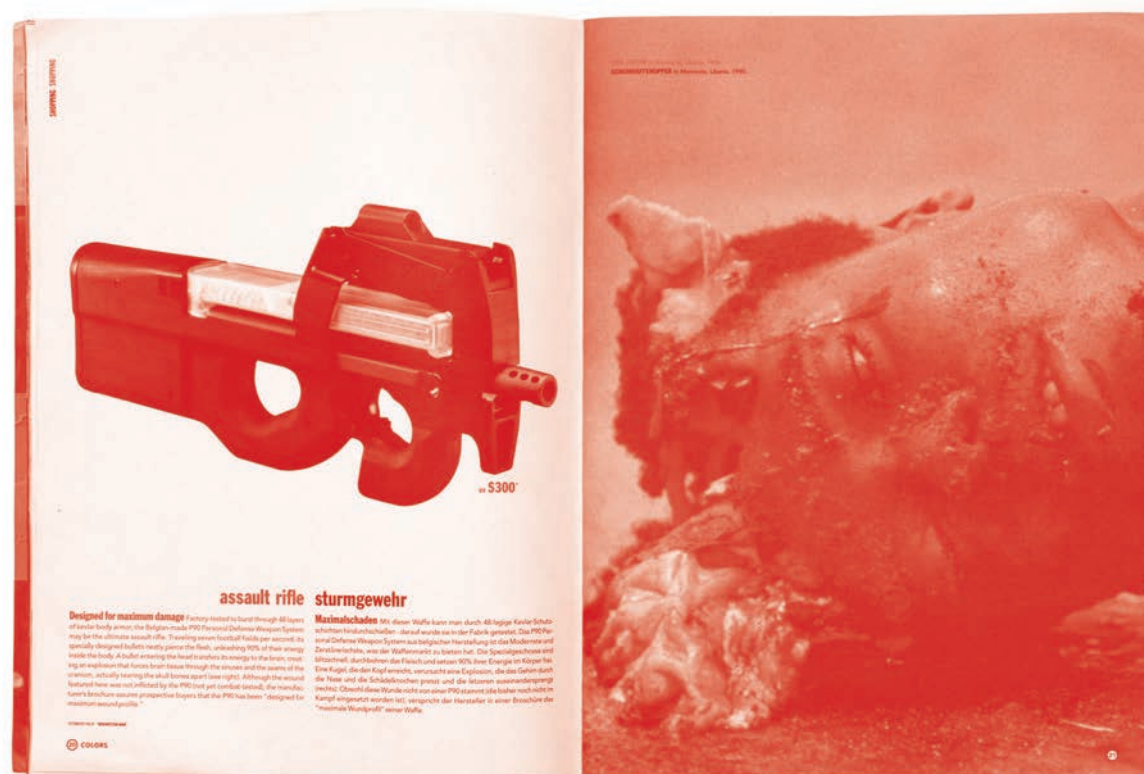
At the start there were three of us. It was the start of the Internet era and that helped us to no end in research. It may have been the first magazine created using the web but we weren't even aware of that. I know that all the titles I read were the same, copying one another, and they really annoyed me. And then there was my personal part, my search for personal freedom. For me, being free means dedicating and chaining myself to a project. *COLORS* was a great project to free me from complexes...such as thinking I wasn't intelligent enough, that I didn't have the required talent, of not being able to do things, of being lazy. That's the sort of stuff that ties us down. I always look for projects that allow me to free myself from complexes that

say I'm not able to do something. That's why I have to do things. I don't feel free when I'm lying on the beach in the sun, on the contrary. If I'm not busy, I'm not free. For me work is a liberation. *COLORS* arose from the combination of all these things, some of which were very human and personal.

At the start you said that lots of magazines didn't publish your photographs. Why not?

Because they didn't like the condom, they didn't like the child being born, they didn't like the priest kissing the nun, they didn't like the crosses in the war cemetery...

models, like all the other fashion brands do. It was admired because it had the courage to handle its communications in a completely different way from the others. *COLORS* fell into that kind of vision. We weren't producing a commercial magazine. *COLORS* was intriguing and also intimidating but everyone had it on their table. All the people ahead of the curve read *COLORS*. I went to a publisher's to sell the issue on death, they thought I was crazy! A magazine that talks about death! But are you all immortal? I asked them. This is the only thing that is certain about our lives. That was the kind of thing that happened when I was in contact with the real publishing world.



But that was primarily abroad, not nationally.

I had the great chance at Benetton to deal directly with Luciano; I could go ahead with my projects before having to have his agreement. I always tried to work like that. I had the space to experiment without knowing if the things I was doing would work. For this you need an enlightened entrepreneur. An artist is only free when he shows his client that he can make him rich. By that I don't mean only rich financially. I believe that at Benetton they were also enriched culturally, ethically and humanly; I too was enriched. It was a collective enrichment. Some clients only think of the money side, only believe in profits. But there are those who understand that enrichment also comes in other forms: power, prestige, culture and modernity. Benetton would never have won any admiration if it had just used testimonials or top

How did an issue of *COLORS* come about? Who gave the input? Who chose the theme?

I wrote many of the editorials. There was nothing programmed. My son Rocco recently reminded me of a story during the early issues of *COLORS*. We were in Paris to do some photos for the first issue of *COLORS* on AIDS. I said to Tibor: "Let's go to my place in Tuscany by car. That way, travelling and looking at the countryside between Paris and Tuscany we will have time to discuss the magazine. It'll do us good." We left in an enormous Mercedes with my son sitting behind us and I remember that for the whole journey Tibor and I argued incessantly, about ideas and how the magazine should be done. Of course, with an American I had to speak English as even the notion of other languages is foreign to them. When he pretended he didn't understand [my Italian], I said to Tibor:

“Learn Italian, idiot, I’m paying you with Italian money”. We’d sing to Bob Dylan together, argue some more, stop to eat Aligot and drink Pinot Nero, and on it went. Publishers who produce magazines in the normal way have managers in ties and jackets who use market research. We do the complete opposite.

What was the best issue of *COLORS*?

The one on war because it was the deepest, the most structured. I was finally able to explain that war was nothing but a form of communication. There was the Gulf War on and I said: “But look at these people, they want to communicate but they’re illiterate. So they drop bombs”. But then all wars are like that.

That’s the time that Alex Marashan arrived on the scene, the best writer at *COLORS*. A Californian who had just finished at Harvard and with whom I still work. We were in Rome because I wanted to change the editing location every two or three years. I didn’t plan anything. That’s how it was at *COLORS*. That’s how I do everything, I’m a situationist. We were in Rome and were looking for writers. I put an ad in a rag for foreign students and found Alex Marashan. He had applied to the ten best universities in America and been accepted by all of them. He’d studied Sociology and History of Art at Harvard, he was 24. “That’s our man”, I said to Tibor.

What did he have over the others?

I looked him in the eye! Intelligent! We still work together. Then Tibor got ill and didn’t want to come to Paris. He went back to the States. And so Alex took his place as editor-in-chief, just in time for the issue on war, which was especially important to me. It was very interesting to analyze communication through war... It’s its most violent means of expression. Among other things, war is always fashionable, it never changes. It was a fantastic issue, with a great deal to say. If you don’t follow fashion, you’re always fashionable, if you don’t follow the news, you’re always topical.

How long did it take to produce an issue?

Not long and a lot. For me the important thing was that the concept underlying the theme should be understood – the translation of the concept and its many possibilities. There were all kinds of discussions...

What was always characteristic of *COLORS* was that it said what nobody wanted to say or hear: it said what was taboo. It pushed in our faces what we didn’t want to see or say because it was frightening. Like the model for the Nolita campaign (by Oliviero Toscani), even if it has nothing

to do with *COLORS*, and her way of seeing life. Do you think that approach is still topical? Do you ever ask yourself that?

I’m not interested in being topical. As I said before, I’m a *situationist*. I see things and I want to document them. There’s no such thing as a shocking photograph. Or a shocking image or text. A photograph records the facts around us. I’m not here as a benefactor. I’m here to record what I see. There are those who not only look but also see; there are those who don’t want to know or see, and who will come to see it later. An artist is someone who expresses what he sees and feels. Those who look for ideas don’t see and therefore don’t have ideas. When you have no creativity, ok, then go look for ideas. Creativity is a consequence, someone might say, “Look, that guy is really creative”. Anyone who calls himself creative is a fool and is certainly not creative at all. The only creatives are women, because they’re able to make babies. We men create nothing. Women are creators, we men have this complex of having to be creative and so are condemned to be artists. It’s an instinct. It’s energy.

If you had to do an issue of *COLORS* now, what theme would you choose?

Immortality. Immortality will be useful to those who come after us. After I’m dead I won’t care anymore. Immortality is only of interest to those who are alive.

Were there any magazines in the ’80s or ’90s that inspired you, however much *COLORS* was a pioneer?

Time, the photographs in *Life* in the ’50s, *Twen*, *Nova*, *Playboy* where there were beautiful women but also excellent articles and interviews. I remember the one with Fidel Castro. *Playboy* combined intellectuality, beauty and, of course, sexuality. Fantastic!

Today what magazines do you read?

Only dailies in different languages – English, French, and German. I don’t read magazines or books. I like newspapers, which are necessities for me. They’re like the air. I’d like to produce a newspaper based on the news but I wouldn’t organize it like a typical paper. I wouldn’t have sections dedicated to foreign news, human interest news, politics, and so on. I’d base it on contrasting services, with beauty, war, design, culture, etc.

Did the sales of *COLORS* increase over the years and with it the feedback from the buyers?

We had a global public, we’d grown in the world. Although we had a distribution of 50 copies per shop, there were some where youngsters would

wait outside for the new issue, where the shops displayed it like a flag. Then there were shops that left it still bundled in plastic in the toilet because they didn't want to be contaminated by absurd themes and unconventional news. They were scared of *COLORS*. It embarrassed them. That was *COLORS* for you.

Today is there any photographer or artist you think could carry on a project as pioneering as *COLORS* was in the early '90s?

Certainly, only that no one teaches them not to be frightened of being frightened. If you do something without being frightened, it'll never be interesting or good. Everyone wants to be sure of what they're doing. Any really

interesting idea simply can't be safe. I did *COLORS* with my fingers crossed.

Did Benetton give you carte blanche with *COLORS*?

They had no idea of what I was doing. Not even I knew. It was like discovering America. I never have carte blanche. I need limits and difficulties to overcome. Anyway, I could never have done it alone, I exploited the talents of others. Those who work with me wonder why I always ask more of them. I ask what others think impossible but then they realize that much of the impossible is actually possible and this gives everyone a great deal of satisfaction! I've never done anything just to sell, I do things because they're interesting.

Ciao *COLORS*

Come papà di *COLORS* non avrei mai immaginato che un giorno avrei provato le stesse emozioni di Mastro Geppetto, papà di Pinocchio. *COLORS*, Pinocchio. Uguali e opposti. Speciali. Tutti e due curiosi, sempre alla ricerca di qualcosa, entusiasti, coraggiosi, ingenui, pieni di amore, di guai e di speranza. Senza conformismi inutili, con tanta innocenza e umanità. *COLORS* compie dieci anni, dieci anni di libertà, di alternatività, di ricerca, di passione. Aver potuto creare e dirigere *COLORS* è stato per me un grande privilegio. Attraverso *COLORS* ho conosciuto tanti collaboratori fantastici, tanti amici, tanta umanità speciale. Come Pinocchio, con *COLORS* abbiamo conosciuto il Paese dei Balocchi, la Fata Turchina, la Balena, il Gatto e la Volpe, il Grillo parlante, Lucignolo, Mangiafuoco. *COLORS* e Pinocchio, tutti e due alla ricerca della verità, tutti e due nati e cresciuti nella diversità, tutti e due alla ricerca del resto del mondo. Dopo dieci anni *COLORS* è diventato adulto come Pinocchio, *COLORS* come Pinocchio non ha più bisogno del papà. Ringrazio tutti quelli che hanno contribuito a creare questa bellissima fiaba-avventura-giornale. Adesso continuerò a leggere questo giornale-fiaba come se io fossi ridiventato ancora bambino. C'era una volta... un Re! No, un pezzo di legno, no, un giornale, no, *COLORS*! Ciao a tutti e buona fortuna.

Oliviero Toscani

Goodbye *COLORS*

As papa of *COLORS*, I never imagined that one day I would have felt just like Master Geppetto, Pinocchio's papa. *COLORS*, Pinocchio. Equal and opposite. Special. Both of them curious, always looking for something, enthusiastic, courageous, ingenuous, full of love, trouble and hope. No futile conformism, and a lot of innocence and humanity. *COLORS* is ten years old—ten years of freedom, of alternative-ness, of exploration, of passion. It has been a great privilege for me to have created, realized and directed *COLORS*. Through *COLORS* I got to know the Land of Toys, the Blue Fairy, the Whale, the Cat and the Fox, the Talking Cricket, Candlewick and Fire-eater. *COLORS* and Pinocchio—both of them looking for the truth, both born and raised to be different, both determined to investigate the rest of the world. After 10 years, *COLORS*, like Pinocchio, has become an adult, and, like Pinocchio, *COLORS* doesn't need a father any more. I thank everyone who helped create this wonderful fable/adventure/magazine. Now I'll get to read it as if I were a child again. Once upon a time there was a king—no, a piece of wood—no, a magazine—no, *COLORS*!!! Goodbye to all, and good luck.

Oliviero Toscani



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