

Culture

ART MUSIC

A life's work, fueled by youthful trauma

Fabio Mauri of Italy will be a featured artist at the Venice Biennale

BY ARTHUR LUBOW

After the defeat of Fascism in World War II, images filtered into Italy that portrayed, in horrifying detail, the concentration camp victims of Nazi Germany. At the home of Fabio Mauri in Rome, those pictures arrived with unusual frequency, because among his father's varied businesses was the distributorship of 300 foreign newspapers.

Mauri, who was a teenager, reacted with profound and paralyzing shock. When drafted into the Italian Army, he suffered a nervous breakdown; for eight years, he shuttled between psychiatric hospitals and monasteries. Eventually, his father, who also represented the playwright Luigi Pirandello, sent him to assist on a South American tour of Mr. Pirandello's "Six Characters in Search of an Author." Somewhere between Rio de Janeiro and Buenos Aires, Mauri fell in love with an actress in the production and recovered. He became an artist.

In a career that lasted half a century, Mauri, who died in 2009, produced work after work that probed the problem that had unhinged him as a boy: How could such atrocities happen under everyone's eyes in Europe? In drawings, sculptures, performances and installations, he explored the ways in which mass media and public spectacle can mask and warp the world. The imposition of prejudice and discrimination in the service of ideology particularly fascinated him.

Mauri was little known outside Italy in his lifetime. That is changing. Okwui Enwezor, the director of the Venice Biennale, which opens in May, has chosen



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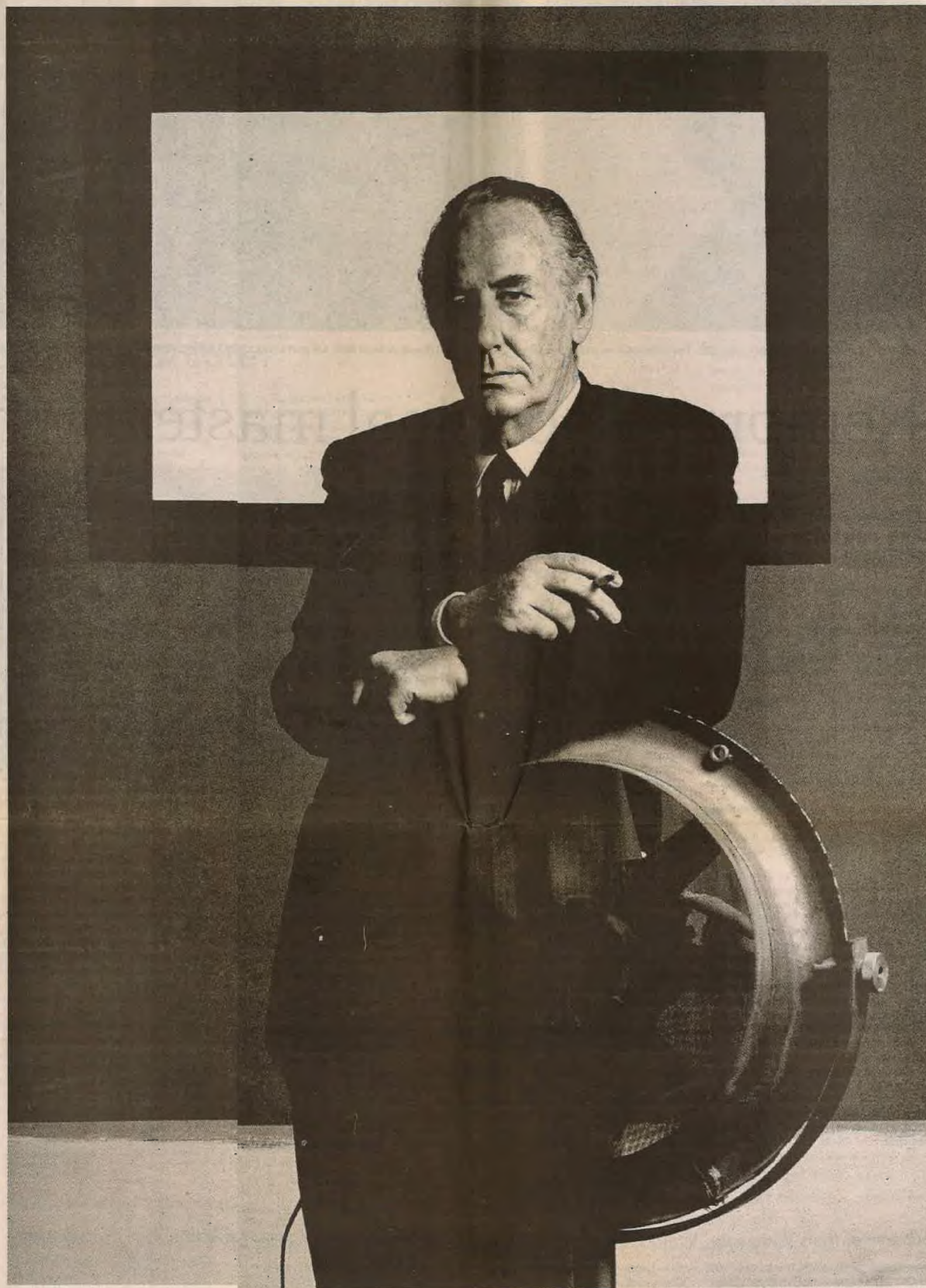
Mauri as a central artist in the exhibition, with work displayed in three locations.

"One of the great things about the Biennale is you can make decisions that reacquaint the public with work that has been under the radar," Mr. Enwezor said. "The power of his pictures and the defiance of his vociferousness is something I find fantastic — so fresh, contemporary, very fearless. I hope it will be a good surprise for people."

Mauri's work is also on view at Hauser & Wirth gallery in New York, in the artist's first solo exhibition in the United States, organized by Olivier Renaud-Clément, through May 2.

When he began in the early 1950s, Mauri drew cartoon characters that resembled, without his knowing it, the contemporaneous Pop Art of Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol in the United States. But the motivations were different. Unlike the American artists, Mauri was not celebrating or critiquing an affluent society.

"Fabio was interested in how the media manipulates and shapes consciousness," said Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev,



Fabio Mauri, who died in 2009, produced work after work that examined the problem that had unhinged him as a boy. Left, an image from his 1971 project "Ebrei" (Jewess).

an art historian who has written authoritatively on Mauri. "He said to me, 'When I got out of the war, the sun was Fascist.'"

Mauri quickly foresaw the power of television, which was introduced to

Italy on a wide scale in 1954. The ubiquity of the screen reinforced his perception that the world as we know it is a projection. He began drawing the shape of a framed rectangle in late 1957, progressing quickly to shaped "screens"

inscribed with gnomic sayings or celebrity images. He carried his fascination with projection into performances, in which, for instance, he beamed the grandly stirring, wartime-era Soviet film "Alexander Nevsky" onto a milk

pail. Bumping an airy representation off the silver screen onto the most humdrum object imaginable, with all the ensuing distortions, grounded it. This was an act of demystification.

The most famous of these projections

was staged in 1975, when, pinning a work to its creator, Mauri projected the film "The Gospel According to St. Matthew" onto the body and white shirt of its director, Pier Paolo Pasolini, who had been a friend since childhood. Although Mauri was close to many Italian intellectuals of his era — including Alberto Moravia, Gillo Pontecorvo and Umberto Eco — his tie to Pasolini was probably the most important.

One of Mauri's earliest performance pieces, "What Fascism Is," in 1971, derived from a day he spent as a schoolboy with Pasolini. They were representing their Bologna school in a rhetoric competition in 1938, part of a Fascist extravaganza in Florence in honor of a state visit by Hitler and other top German officials. In his piece, Mauri symbolized the visiting dignitaries with a wax figure and segregated part of the audience into a Jewish area marked by a Star of David. A spectacle proceeds, with calisthenics and athletics, terminated by the sounds of bombs falling.

"He was asking, 'What if this was you, would you be energized or disgusted?'" said Sebastiano Mauri, his nephew.

Based on his own early experience, Mauri recognized that beauty could be

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channeled all too easily for pernicious ends.

Pasolini was murdered in 1975. Mauri reprised the "St. Matthew" projection piece, which was called "The Intellectual," after his friend's death, this time shining the film on Pasolini's empty white shirt. In 2005, Mauri conducted another posthumous collaboration, with Pasolini reading in sonorous cadences "La Guinea," a poem about the divisions in the world and the survival of Fascism in Italy. On the floor, Mauri placed a cellophane-covered framed photograph of the two men during a rehearsal of "What Fascism Is."

At the Biennale, this work will greet spectators as they enter the central pavilion. Also included will be an installation of "Evil Numbers," a nonsensical mathematical formula written on a blackboard facing a large photomural of Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi propaganda minister, at the "degenerate art" exhibition at the Haus der Kunst in Munich in 1937.

Describing these works by Mauri, Mr. Enwezor, who is also the director of the Haus der Kunst, said, "They are not like visual events but more like psychological events."

Certainly the same could be said of "Ebrei" (Jewess), Mauri's most celebrated and controversial work, from 1971. In it, a nude young woman stands in front of a mirror and cuts off locks of her hair, pasting them in the shape of a Star of David onto the mirror.

Mauri surrounded the central action, which evokes the haircuts given to prisoners on the way to the Nazi gas chambers, with simulated hideous objects — soap made from corpses and a horse harness fabricated from human skin. When it was introduced in a Venice gallery, spectators stood at a distance of 100 feet or more. No one dared get close. What they saw was primarily through the mirror, which acted as a kind of screen. But in the most recent performance, at Hauser & Wirth in New York last month, audience members crowded to the front and took pictures with cell phones.

In a development that would hardly have surprised the avant-garde Mauri, people no longer need to wait to watch television in the evening for a dose of artificial reality.

Instead, they carry their projectors and screens with them in their pockets, all the time, to make and view images, and images of other images.