

FABRIZIO PLESSI

Biography, Bibliography, Exhibitions

Biography

Fabrizio Plessi was born on 3 April 1940 in Reggio Emilia.

He completed his early studies at the Art High School and subsequently enrolled at the Academy of Fine Arts in Venice, where he would later hold the chair of Painting. From 1968 onwards, he began to focus his artistic research on the theme of water, explored through installations, films, videotapes and performances. His works were first exhibited at the Experimental Pavilion of the XXXV Venice Biennale in 1970 and again at the following edition in 1972.

In 1973, on the occasion of his solo exhibition at Galleria Vinciana in Milan, he presented the theme *Acquabiografico*, bringing together most of his creations related to the subject of water.

In the following years, Plessi began to devote himself to performative actions and to presenting his works in public spaces such as the Palazzo dei Diamanti in Ferrara, the Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus in Munich, the Internationaal Cultureel Centrum in Antwerp (1975–1978–1980), and Le Palais des Beaux Arts in Brussels (1975–1983).

In 1978, he was invited to the Venice Biennale for photography, as part of the special exhibition *L'Immagine Provocata*. In 1981, he took part in the Venice Film Festival with the film *Liquid Movie*, winning the *Premio Città di Milano*. The following year, he was invited with *Underwater*, a French production that marked the first time an electronic medium was admitted to a film festival.

His complete video work was presented at the Centre Pompidou Beaubourg in Paris in 1982, the year in which his artistic research began to move increasingly towards the environmental potential of video, incorporating three-dimensional structures. Thus emerged the illusionistic relationship between the representation and reality of the liquid element, amplified by the extreme technological possibilities of mechanical and electronic reproduction.

In 1984, he participated in the XLI Venice Biennale with the video installation *Water* and inaugurated the Musée d'Art Contemporain de Villeneuve d'Ascq (Lille) with a major retrospective exhibition. The following

year, he inaugurated his first major retrospective, which can be regarded as the first exhibition of environmental video installations in Italy, at the Rotonda della Besana in Milan.

In 1986, he represented Italy at the 42nd Venice Biennale and created one of his most significant works for the occasion: *Bronx*. The definitive turning point in his international recognition came the following year with the presentation of the monumental installation *Roma* at documenta 8 in Kassel. In Bologna, he won the international prize *L'Immagine elettronica* and created the sets for *Sciame* by Enzo Cosimi on the occasion of the Rovereto Festival.

In 1988, in Madrid, at the Museo Español de Arte Contemporáneo, he inaugurated a major retrospective featuring fourteen installations. That same year, in Prato, he created the work *Roma II* for the inauguration of the Centro per l'Arte Contemporanea Luigi Pecci, while simultaneously working on the sets for the television programme *Immagina* for RAI Uno in Rome.

In 1989, he was invited to the exhibition *Videoskulptur retrospektiv und aktuell 1963-1989* at the Kunstverein in Cologne, where he presented a radical new creation entitled *Materia Prima*. He took part in the exhibition *Borealis* at the Louisiana Museum in Humlebaek, Denmark, and in ARTEC '89, 1st International Biennale in Nagoya, in Japan.

In 1990, on the occasion of his fiftieth birthday, his hometown of Reggio Emilia dedicated a major retrospective to him, held at the museum, at the Foro Boario and at the vast space of the Cavallerizza, where the artist presented his *Armadi* for the first time.

From 1990 to 2000, Fabrizio Plessi was Professor of Humanisation of Technologies at the Kunsthochschule für Medien in Cologne. In 1992, he created the electronic sets *Titanic*, presented in the spectacular setting of the Musée de l'Industrie in Charleroi. During the same period, he directed a workshop for UNESCO with the participation of twenty young international artists on the theme *Babel*. Following a trip to India, the video installation *Bombay-Bombay* was created for the Museum Ludwig in Cologne.

In 1993, he presented the work *Cristalli Liquidi*, commissioned and exhibited at Caffè Florian in Venice on the occasion of the Biennale. That same year, he created the electronic sets for Luciano Pavarotti's celebrated live concert in Central Park, New York. His monumental video installation *Liquid Time*, produced by Philips for the Berlin Fair, was also inaugurated and subsequently acquired by the Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie in Karlsruhe. Also in 1993, Plessi was awarded the UNESCO Miró Medal in Paris.

In 1994, he designed the electronic sets for the television programme *Studio Moor* on the German television

channel *Premiere*, with his video installations changing every month. During the same period, he was appointed Professor of Electronic Scenography at the Kunsthochschule für Medien in Cologne.

In 1995, he created the two video installations *Fuochi Fatui* for the Fundació Pilar de Joan Miró in Palma de Mallorca, one of which was exceptionally installed in Miró's own studio, among his works.

In 1998, he exhibited at the Guggenheim Museum Soho in New York. The following year, for Sony's new building in Berlin, he created a gigantic electronic waterfall that decomposed into sixteen million different colours, officially inaugurated only in June 2000.

Awarded at the 13th Quadriennale di Roma, that same year in Hannover he won the prestigious *Kunstpreis der Nord/LB*, establishing him as the best artist of the year in Germany.

In 2000, on the occasion of the EXPO Universal in Hannover, he created *Mare Verticale* for the Italian Government, which can be considered the most monumental technological sculpture ever built. The 44-metre-high steel structure contains a gigantic LED screen simulating a constantly moving blue electric wave. He represented Italy at the Biennale di Kwangju in Korea and, that same year, created the theatrical sets for Aterballetto's production *Sogno di una notte di mezza estate*.

In 2001, he participated in the 8th Cairo Biennale as guest of honour with the installation *Cairo-Cairo II*, dedicated to the Nile and consisting of 80 locally produced clay amphorae.

In June of the same year, on the occasion of the Venice Biennale, the city dedicated the exhibition *Waterfire* to him at the Museo Correr, an important survey of his most recent works based on the themes of water and fire, together with the very large installation created for the occasion in Piazza San Marco.

In October, the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao dedicated a solo exhibition to him featuring his famous installation *Roma II*. In 2002, he won the international competition organised by Loewe in Kronach, where he created a gigantic outdoor electronic sculpture on the theme of water and fire, using climate-controlled televisions for the first time. In June of the same year, in Rome, the Scuderie Papali of Quirinale opened its doors to contemporary art with his extensive retrospective entitled *Plessi Paradiso Inferno*, which remains the largest exhibition of Plessi's historical works ever presented in Italy. In November, he began an intense collaboration with Calvin Klein, creating for the brand a series of large-scale moving installations in New York, Dallas and Paris around the recurring themes of the tree and electronic fire.

In 2003, on the occasion of the Salone del Mobile in Milan, he installed a new spectacular and gigantic work beneath the fourteenth-century Loggia dei Mercanti: ten overturned fire boats moved above the heads of

visitors, radically disrupting all conventional perceptions.

The Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice commissioned him to create a new work for its new entrance. He subsequently conceived *Digital Fall*, one of the most technologically advanced sculptures in the world.

Germany paid tribute to him with the major retrospective *Traumwelt* in Berlin at the Martin Gropius Bau. Covering an area of 5,000 square metres, the exhibition was dedicated to the contradictions and urgent issues of cities around the world and can be considered the artist's largest and most comprehensive exhibition.

In 2005, at Artefiera, he exhibited for the first time, with great success, a new series of dreamlike and evocative piles of stones entitled *Digital Stones*. Also in Germany, the artist began a close collaboration with the BMW automotive industry, developing a series of projects in which automotive research and the poetics of artistic creation came together in a stimulating symbiosis of materials and forms.

On the occasion of the 51st Venice Biennale, in collaboration with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Plessi created a new version of *Mare Verticale* in front of the entrance to the Biennale, at the Giardini. Rising 44 metres from the waters of the lagoon, it became a symbol of the Biennale itself.

In 2006, he began a new collaboration with the Italian dance company Aterballetto. Plessi designed the sets and costumes for *Romeo&Juliet*.

During these years, Plessi presented solo exhibitions at the most important art fairs in Europe and the United States, including Artefiera in Bologna, MiArt in Milan, the Grand Palais in Paris, Miami, Art Cologne and Vienna.

He also exhibited a series of large installations and large-scale drawings on the recurring theme of lava at Contini Art Gallery in Cortina d'Ampezzo and Venice.

From 2008 onwards, he began an important collaboration with Louis Vuitton on the occasion of the opening of its Canton Road spaces in Hong Kong. For the occasion, the artist created a brand-new technological handbag equipped with a battery-powered ultra-flat television displaying continuously moving images of liquid gold, considered the world's first digital handbag.

In 2009, during the 53rd Venice Biennale, he inaugurated the exhibition *L'anima dell'acqua* at Ca' D'Oro, occupying the palace's courtyard with a monumental fleet of Venetian boats equipped with digital blue water, waiting to set sail towards the unknown.

In 2010, Fabrizio Plessi produced the digital sets for Pirandello's play *Vestire gli ignudi* at the Teatro Goldoni in

Venice. That same year, this time for the Teatro La Fenice, he designed and created the digital lifetime achievement award presented to Grace Jones. On the island of La Maddalena in Sardinia, on the occasion of the Louis Vuitton Trophy, he created one of his most extraordinary video installations, *Mari Verticali*.

In 2011, *Mari Verticali*, with the support of Louis Vuitton, was exhibited at the 54th Venice Biennale in the Padiglione Venezia. Here Plessi presented a new vision of his digital fleet, developing symbiotically within the semicircular structure of the Padiglione Venezia, which Arzanà Navi and Louis Vuitton returned to the city after a substantial and meticulous restoration. The space was filled with a grand concert of waters in continuous movement and transformation. Six black steel vessels emerged from the darkness, while sounds, currents and waves of symbolic seas were evoked on the video screens embedded in their hulls.

In 2012, with the exhibition *Monumenta*, held in the Archaeological and Landscape Park of the Valley of the Temples in Agrigento, the artist presented nine digital installations, concurrently with the *LLaut Light* projects in Venice at Contini Art Gallery and the exhibition *Il flusso della ragione* at Palazzo della Ragione in Padua.

In 2013, he was present in Mantua, in the magnificent Sala dei Giganti, with an exhibition capable of establishing a harmonious dialogue with Giulio Romano and his majestic figures.

On 29 November 2013, near the site of the former motorway customs station between Italy and Austria, the Plessi Museum was inaugurated: an innovative architectural structure housing a permanent exhibition dedicated to the art of the great Master. Curated by Fabrizio Plessi, the exhibition itinerary brings together video installations, sculptures and graphic-pictorial works. The artist also designed the layout, creating tables, seating, work counters and shelving in Corten steel specifically for the occasion. It is a total work of art that envelops and engages the visitor, who becomes a direct experimenter of sensations, colours and sounds generated by the four elements that have always characterised the Master's artistic production.

The later years of his career have been marked by major projects, important recognitions, and prestigious international collaborations.

Among Fabrizio Plessi's most significant experiences are the major retrospective exhibition *Liquid Labyrinth* at the Ludwig Museum in Budapest in 2014. In 2016, in Venice, he created *Underwater* for the Fondaco dei Tedeschi, an impressive installation of constantly moving digital golden mosaics accompanied by music by Michael Nyman. In 2017, at the Teatro La Fenice in Venice, he created *FENIX DNA*, a monumental work dedicated to the themes of water and fire. In 2019, at the Terme di Caracalla in Rome, he presented *Il segreto del tempo*, while in 2020, to celebrate his 80th birthday, Venice dedicated *L'Età dell'Oro* to him in Piazza San Marco. Finally, in 2021, he created *Plessi's Digital Wall* for the Istituto Italiano di Cultura di Abu Dhabi,

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reaffirming his ongoing exploration of the relationship between art, technology, light, and space.

After living and working between Venice and Mallorca, Fabrizio Plessi died in Venice on 23 August 2026.