

Catalogue of the exhibition Tinguely e Munari – Opere in azione, La Spezia, CAMEC – Centro Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, 2004

INTERVIEW WITH GILLO DORFLES by Alberto Fiz

Alberto Fiz: *The figure of Bruno Munari is still enshrouded in mystery, so much so that still today it remains an unsolved case, at least in part. What is the reason for this?*

Gillo Dorfles: Munari cannot be put in a specific niche and, probably, will not be in the future. That owes to the fact that he was neither a painter, nor a designer, nor a pedagogue, but was all those things together. That's what makes him such a unique case not only in Italian arena but also worldwide. Munari always occupied a very particular place in the art world. Others, in his place, would have exploited their artistic output in mercantile terms, making it into a fruitful monetary resource. Instead, after a rather brief period during which he collaborated with MAC, the Movement of Concrete Art which lasted from 1948 to 1958, Munari was dedicated by and large to design and to teaching children by means of art. So he lost interest in producing works of visual art, typified by such important cycles as his *Macchine inutili*, his *Libri illeggibili*, his *Negativi-positivi* and many other works which, on their own, would otherwise have made him a fortune and have provided him that celebrity which the art world recognized in others surely far less vital than he was.

AF *Every time we talk about Munari, we tend to stress his eclecticism, his creative genius, but we feel somewhat embarrassed to treat him as an artist in the full sense of the world. Do you consider that attitude correct?*

GD The multi-polarity of Munari's work has both positive and negative sides. His painting came to a halt at a certain level, while his *Abitacolo*, certain lamps and other prototypes, are still points of reference in the design world. We need to emphasize the fact that Munari was, above all, an inventor and, once a new way of operating in art, in design, or in pedagogy was invented, he left implementing his ideas to others, even to letting them exploit those ideas beyond belief. One such example of that are his laboratories scattered the world over.

AF *So, is talking about a "Munari method" exact?*

GD I think so. Just as the Montessori method exists, so does the Munari method.

AF *What does it consist of?*

GD On the one hand, of studying matter and materials, to which we could add the inventive aspect which permits the transformation of any element into a clever plastic contraption. A demonstration of this are his pseudo-musical instruments, his *Macchine inutili*, the invention of a mechanism to pursue rhythm. Moreover, the Munari method prophesied the active participation of children in such a way as to develop their sensorial perceptions, not only the visual ones but acoustical, tactile and rhythmical ones. It is no coincidence that Munari's son became a well-known psychologist. In fact, Munari, too, always paid particular attention to the problems of Gestalt psychology.

AF *The exhibition that will be presented at the CAMEC in La Spezia, makes, for the first time, a comparison between Munari and Jean Tinguely. In your opinion, what is the relationship between the two artists?*

GD Tinguely was also part of the MAC, even though only for a short time, given that in December 1954, following a Munari's advice, his works were displayed in an important exhibition at the Studio d'Architettura B24 in Milan entitled "Automates, sculptures et reliefs mécaniques de Tinguely". Having said that, Tinguely's concept of the machine is the opposite, even though complementary, of Munari's. The Italian artist, in his *Macchine inutili*, created anti-machines, a conceptual metaphor of the machine. In fact he replaced the utilitarian aspect with an ostensible, virtualized mechanism, according to a process that also involved illegible books, virtual books that

fail to fulfil the function of a book. Tinguely, on the other hand was more of a sculptor than Munari, and has created genuine mechanisms, even though absurd and completely gratuitous.

AF Tinguely came to Milan when he was very young, he was not even thirty. What type of reception did his exhibition receive?

GD The Swiss artist was a distinguished stranger and exhibition, as, incidentally, all of the MAC's exhibitions were visited by a few specialists and above all were regularly slated by the official press, particularly by the official critic of the "Corriere della Sera", Leonardo Borgese who, although a very intelligent man, was tied to the schemes of traditional art.

AF Returning to Munari, what influence has he had on today's art?

GD Munari's influence during the second half of the 20th century was very similar to that of Marcel Duchamp. They both glorified the importance of found objects in the same way. It suffices to recall Munari's stones from the island of Elba or his masterful ways of using paper, and it was no accident that we can trace his influence in certain of today's forms of art dissociated from traditional painting and sculpture, and, if anything, in the installations and the use of objects. Visiting recent editions of the Venetian Biennale, there are many artistic installations that closely correspond to Munari's mentality. Munari's contribution lay precisely in that capacity to take any everyday object, from shards of bottles to stones, and turn them into works of art.

AF Don't you think that there's always an underlying ironic and demystifying component in his attitude toward art?

GD Rather than irony, you might call it amusement, an attitude that was consolidated in a progressive detachment from his own work which he in no way celebrated. Differing from other artists in this, Munari never exploited his work for mercantile purposes and ends. He was always a disinterested experimenter.

AF Munari's autobiography was a sort of nursery rhyme starting with "That of the Useless Machines from 1930", only to end with "That of Oil on Canvas from 1980" and "That of Lego Award" (1986), in a progression that lasted for over sixty years. To the contrary, some observers tend to censure and refuse to recognize a real inspiration in the works of his final years. In your opinion, is it right to circumscribe his work to a certain definite period?

GD Munari's work developed over his whole lifetime, from his early childhood to his final months on earth. His every gesture, in fact, was an invention. That doesn't mean that every invention was a work of art, but it does testify to his incessantly creative methods and approach to life.