

Creating an extended conversation superseding time,  
Lavinia Filippi has juxtaposed Hans Ulrich Obrist and  
Stano Filko's historical dialogue, with contemporary  
views by Magdalena Drwiega and Luisa Gardini on selected  
questions she asked them during the studio visits.

Stano Filko  
Interview by Hans Ulrich Obrist  
Bratislava, 2006

Magdalena Drwiega  
Interview by Lavinia Filippi  
London, 2018

Luisa Gardini  
Interview by Lavinia Filippi  
Rome, 2018

So this is your studio?

This is my repository! I moved here between the 1960s and the 1970s. It is a place for contemplating the action. It is also a revolutionary evolution!

Would you describe this place as a Gesamtkunstwerk?

It's the whole of history until now. There are several rooms that are divided into separate areas. It's all about my history, over fifty years of it. That's why it's a repository. When I come here, it's about going into the past.

And do you have another studio for the present?

I spend a minority of my time in the present, and a majority in the past.

Earlier we spoke about Schwitters and the Merzbau.

Yes, it is like a Gesamtkunstwerk here. It is divided into five spaces, and each of them solves different problems. All these problems are solved in parallel, simultaneously.

And can you give us a tour of these zones?

Yes, of course. Follow me. It's in alphabetical and numerical order. There are seven colours for the codes: green, orange, yellow, red, blue, black and white. It also works in five dimensions. They are five absolute dimensions. I'll show you this sound piece to demonstrate how to cross these dimensions. It is a sound sculpture. It goes from the fifth dimension into the fourth, which is the universe or universes, and on into the others. This one goes to the east and the south.

Please tell me more about the colours.

Are they multidimensional?

Yes, green is north. All these are symbols, like the Egyptians had. When you sit in the one place, it all comes together at that point. That's why there is a pyramid on the cover of my catalogue. This next one uses symbols from Leonardo.

So the whole house is multidimensional?

Yes. I've been working on these kinds of assemblages since the 1950s, and I've regularly remade some of them.

It's incredible! I'm very impressed

I made this as a television set. This work is both extroverted as well as introverted. That one's about my reincarnation, though also about my biography.

So you also have multi-identities.

Yes. This one's for 2037. I'll be a hundred years old by then. I'll carry on until then and then I'll die! Let's go into the second zone.

Do you consider these as separate works or as part of the whole environment?

Any piece could be separated from the rest. You can also create new combinations from these things. These ones have been here for over fifty years.

Yes, I have a studio in East London now, but I often move. I tend to sublet spaces for short periods, I am a nomad in this sense. I don't need a lot of space, I can work anywhere really, it depends of what kind of work I am doing.

Sometimes I make works in the store or the warehouse where I go to buy material. You cannot force creation it is a natural thing, so when it happens, it happens.

I work on different spaces, without dedicating them exclusively to one specific activity. This happens by chance or by necessity. The main difference is the use of large tables when I work on sculptures or large paintings, and vertical surfaces when I draw, paint or make collages.

I try to transform the spaces I work in according to my necessities, whenever this is possible.

Did you always work on your sculptures in this studio? And on your paintings in the other?

No, the spaces I worked in changed over time. At the beginning, for about twenty years, studio and home coincided, afterward the studio has always been a separate space.

Did the room where you photograph and archive your works always exist or is the archiving process recent?

It's recent: it started about ten years ago, using different places.

What is your relationship with science?

I know from catalogues that there are a lot of links in your work.

My relationship to science is fantastical. I replace science with art. Artists and scientists are both researchers for me.

And does this extend to the production of knowledge?

It's about searching for light in the dark.

And have you had dialogues with scientists?

I used to collaborate with scientists at one time – with physicists and mathematicians. We used to discuss a lot, and my work was very much inspired by this at the time. That was during the 1960s. I was born in 1937. Then in 1945, I had my first post-modern thought – from somewhere in between my subconscious and my conscious I realised that it was very much about the ironic identification of mystification.

At the age of eight!

My grandfather was a philosopher, and he translated Thomas Aquinas. He was the first person I really had a relationship with. He wrote texts about science, intelligence and civilization. All of them are in the post-modern vein.

And where do you see the role of the artist in this very interdisciplinary approach?

It seems like a broad definition of the artist. Artists are beings of the third, fourth and fifth dimension. That's the definition of the artist.

You started out with drawings and paintings, but language also featured from a very early stage. Could you tell me about this?

I would define my work as psycho-philosophy. Philosophy is concerned with letters and language, but the psycho part is the visual. I have more than a thousand pages of these texts.

I started with drawing, painting and sculpture, all three practices are equally important and compliments each other.

I believe that art is a form of language and language is a structure that can also appear in visual art. You have to combine letters and words to make a conversation flow, it is the same with art.

A few years ago, I also made some works with letters, numbers or symbols. On a close inspection you can recognise the letters, the language, but from a distance it is an abstract composition. My characters are often meaningless forms. I see them as shapes and to me they are similar to the sounds children make in the early stage, when they start to talk but it does not make sense yet.

I see it as a faraway world.

And where do you see the role of the artist?

The role of the artist should be to avoid having a role a priori, preserving the freedom/necessity to express oneself outside of the box.

The need to use the sign on works from different conception is very recurrent in my practice. It is not easy for me to speak about my own work: I owe my practice to this difficulty I always had with speech. Since my childhood I felt writing was an estranging structure which would keep me at distance. A narrative which encourage me to pursue a ritual based on substance rather than grammar and pure rhetoric. For me, writing belonged to the world of adults, a reality far too structured and inaccessible, which would judge me if I dared express myself so as to place myself within its rules.

When I started to test drawing at school, and I owe that to an illuminated teacher, it would open in me a new, interior dimension. Writing not words, but signs that own a code. Even then, I managed to draw successfully only freehand, with strokes that arose undoubtedly from the relation with the model-object, during what was an instinctive research for shape. We are not born from nothing: I do not believe there are works that are original and that do not have forerunners. My ideal teacher, whose sketches I moved and abandoned myself within, in order to find some sort of help, was Matisse. Matisse's well-known sign, swift and precise, after first trying it an infinite number of times. Later, the New Dada and the Action Painting represented for me additional influences.

I'm also interested in this idea of the accumulation of everything.

It's not unlike Steven Wolfman who recently published a book about the theory of everything, or like the superstring theory. Could you tell me about your early performance in which you declared that everything was happening between one day and seven days later? This seems to be related to the encyclopedic approach. It was a week-long piece, using seven colours as seven days. It was between the first and ninth of May, 1965. It was collective work by Zita Kostrova, Alex Mlynarcik and me, called "Happsoc". But it might also exist in different time and space.

Anything I come across with and I like, I pick up. Anything can be useful and I can transform it into a work of art. We are constantly searching for something special, but it is everywhere and accessible to everyone, but not everybody can see it.

I pick up objects that I feel familiar with, that somehow belong to me, and I collect them. Even if I don't know what I am going to do with them in the first place, I think 'this is cool'. Sometimes I am not consciously aware of the final work, but it has already been created, it already exists in small particles and it just needs time to become something solid, concrete. At the beginning I don't know what it is going to look like. It is like having pieces of puzzle on a table, they do not make sense at the beginning. Then you put the pieces together and the image eventually appears. The same happens with letters, they are abstract on their own, but if you put them together, you create words, phrases and then you are able to communicate. This is the creative process.

I assemble found objects, they are pretty much associations of ideas. I make no difference between the various techniques, which I only consider means for my own expressive needs. In my work, I do not know reflection, nor planning. The thought, an idea of art, a memory, or the very psychic content precede the action. I am not talking about an automatic process: quite the opposite. A state of necessity exists: you may do this, and you may not do otherwise. If the piece ends up not working, you throw it away. Or you set it aside. At times, I rediscover a discarded, forgotten work and to start all over again, using what was already tested as if it was completely new, an incitement to go forward, as it had not occurred before.

Freedom has this meaning, it creates an unmediated relation with language: communication with the art from the past, with the present, with other people? This, and much more. What arises from my production concerns a reality that is wider than my biographical existence.

And do you know approximately how many works you have made in your encyclopaedic career?

Perhaps ten thousand.

I don't know, thousands? I don't pay attention to that and it is not important at all for me. I make things and then I put them on the side and forget about them... It is about making, progressing and always developing something new. I consider all my works playful exercises. I don't want to lose this playfulness. The materials I use for my works all come from everyday life. Depending on who is looking at them, his or her background and knowledge, the same work can be read differently and acquire different meanings. I like the ambiguity, I like it when I create contradictions. The more open to different interpretations, the more interesting the work is, I believe.

I worked endlessly, though with an irregular rhythm, with different phases, that may be recognized in periods where I employed evanescent materials, and others where I devoted myself to the use of pottery and watercolours.

And so do you produce several works every day?

Yes, I make several pieces every day, and during the 1960s I was even doing this whilst in the factories. The link between the post-modern and the post-avant-garde is made clear in this catalogue.

I would not say every day, but yes, I am very prolific. Sometimes I make many pieces in one day and nothing for days. I don't plan, I don't work on a schedule. But I feel like I am making constantly.

One the characteristics of my practice is working on many pieces simultaneously.

And do you have any utopic projects, any unrealised projects?

One project was *The Trip to the Moon and Back*.

Before it happened?

Yes, the work was done before, and was quite utopic. Then I remade it with real photos from the moon landings. The work was buried in the ground, under the pavement and loud-speakers were placed around, from which information about what had happened was broadcast. Another related project was about men living on Mars and women living on Venus, and about them meeting. They presented themselves when they left their planets and settled down on the earth.

No, I don't. It sounds tedious, I think everything happens when it should. It's not possible in my case to have a utopic project, I work in a very natural way, I never plan in advance. It comes in the moment, I live in the present moment, past or future don't exist, for me it is always now.

I would like my pieces to be always connected to one of my personal needs.

How do you feel about the notion of Utopia? Do you feel it is a useful term for considering your work?

Utopia is a psycho-philosophical reality for me.

Is it a concrete Utopia?

Yes, a concrete Utopia.

I noticed that there is one more room with a bed in. Is that your bedroom?

Come and have a look at it. It's a room for books. They are books from the next postmodern period.

Do you know John Latham?

No. Why?

He also worked a lot on the fourth and fifth dimension.

This part is an extension, all about the Old Testament.

We have spoken about philosophy and science, but religion also clearly plays a role in your work and life. This room is almost like a chapel!

I'm interested in many religions. It is all connected to the present. I have been collecting images referring to it for several years.

Do you have an assistant? How do you find time to organize all of this material?

I have never had an assistant. I could never afford one!

No, my work is very personal. I wouldn't be able to have anyone around. But you never know, maybe if in the future I will be working on a large project and I will need help. Anyway, I like to be independent.

I have never had assistants, as that would prove incompatible with my tendency to reject planning.

Could you tell me about the role of drawing in your practice?

Almost all of my drawings are project proposals. All the projects start out as drawings with the hope that they will be realized. One piece is called *Woman on the Map of the World*, so here are some drawings of women. That piece was from the end of the fifties and the beginning of the sixties.

It's an amazing display! It reminds me of the Sir John Soane Museum.

Some of the drawings and final pieces are in museum collections.

This section here seems to be a kind of retrospective based on the ego.

Yes. It all comes together here. Come on upstairs, to the fourth dimension.

So the fourth dimension is blue!

This is energy and it runs right the way through! This is a typical post avant-garde work. It was intentionally made to work harder.

So now we are in the heartland of psycho-techno intelligence?

Yes. And it incorporates the whole universe.

My compositions are often repetitive and they create patterns. It can be almost an obsessive repetition through which I build layer after layer. I constantly jump from making geometrical drawings to action drawings. The drawings sometimes become the inspiration for sculptures, even many years later. There are shapes that stay in the back of my mind until finally I find the right occasion or right material to create them.

Drawing for me is a base, a root, a form of diary to which I can go back and refer to. At the same time these drawings are very often also finished works.

In my activity, the role played by the drawing is of general help to the work itself. The drawing could also represent a finished piece itself.

What's the role of the albums you showed me earlier, the copybooks you extensively produced in the 70s? They seemed to me like diaries where you would exercise on a daily basis.

Yes, they could also be seen in that way; anyhow the work in itself is, at the same time, always an exercise.