CLEARING

From The Millennial Chinese Realm and The Electrical Era
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Bruno Gironcoli (1936-2010) studied at the University of Applied Arts in Vienna from 1957 to 1959 and again from 1961 to 1962. He spent 1960 in Paris. From 1977 to 2004, he was a professor and head of the school of sculpture at the University of Applied Arts in Vienna. In 1989 he was the recipient of the Erste Allgemeine Generali Foundation Sculpture Prize, in 1993 the Grand Austrian State Prize, and in 1997 the Austrian Decoration for Science and Art. Selected international exhibitions of his later years include the 50th Venice Biennale, Austrian Pavilion (2003, curators: Kasper König/Bettina M. Busse), "C'est arrivé demain", Biennale d'Art Contemporain de Lyon (2003, curator: Anne Pontégnie), "Bruno Gironcoli Frühe Arbeiten", Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna (2005), "Bruno Gironcoli 11 Skulpturen", Gerhard-Marcks-Haus, Bremen, Germany (2007), "The Third Mind. Carte Blanche to Ugo Rondinone", Palais de Tokyo, Paris (2008), "Modelle und Prototypen", Galerie Elisabeth & Klaus Thoman – Tiroler Landesmuseum Ferdinandeum, Innsbruck (2008), "Bruno Gironcoli Cavalcade, sculptures et dessins 1963-2001", MOMCA, Geneva (2012), "Gironcoli: Context", Museum Belvedere, Vienna (2013), and "Schlaflos – Das Bett in Geschichte und Gegenwartskunst", 21er Haus, Vienna (2015).

A maker of monumental sculptures balanced between Surrealism and science fiction, the Austrian artist Bruno Gironcoli was a reserved but influential personality on the Viennese art scene. Charlotte Matter traces back through his career, identifying the original traits of his output, the influences and the voracious passion for collecting African sculpture, which transformed his home into a system of narrow passages snaking through hundreds of artworks. Not ascribable to a specific movement or a particular era, the production of this fascinating outsider seems to exist out of time, evoking past and future without belonging to either.

BY CHARLOTTE MATTER

He is considered one of the most eminent protagonists of Viennese contemporary art. He represented Austria at the 50th Venice Biennale in 2003, was a teacher to a whole generation of artists including Franz West, and there are two permanent collections dedicated to his work, yet Bruno Gironcoli (1936-2010) remains relatively little-known outside his native country.

Gironcoli has often been called a loner and an outsider. Indeed, the chair he held as professor for sculpture at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna from 1977 on allowed him to operate outside the constraints of the art market. For him, this position meant not only a secure income, but above all space to work. With the help of assistants, he was able to create monumental sculptures on the school's premises—and also store them. By the time of his retirement in 2004, the studio was bursting, and the relocation of his works was a tedious and lengthy undertaking. Those who had the chance to visit the place inevitably report on the unsettling effect it had on them, a sensation we can only guess at now, looking at the pictures left behind: the large number of sculptures filling the space, interlocked into each other, rendering it almost impossible to perceive the individual works, to distinguish between completed sculptures, scattered elements and working materials.

Before studying art in Vienna in the late 1950s, Gironcoli trained as a goldsmith. The related notion of the amalgam—the combination of different materials, and by extension of different forms, ideas and referential frames—pervades his work, that can be described in many words, though without ever quite fitting or grasping it entirely. His uncanny sculptures combine archaic and pseudo-religious motifs with elements reminiscent of science fiction aesthetics. Some are made of plaster, others of polyester or metal. They are painted in monochrome silver, copper or gold. This coating acts as a skin that covers the sutures. Whilst they are clearly to be situated in the tradition of sculpture (Gironcoli himself described his practice as "conventional"), there is something very lively about the hybrid assemblages of organic and technoid forms, like machines or chimeras coming into existence.

"I remember vividly the first time I saw a sculpture by Bruno Gironcoli, even though it's been over thirty years now," says Christian Bernard, the iconic founder and long-time director of Mamco, Geneva's museum for modern and contemporary art. In 2012, he curated the first—and up to now only—posthumous institutional solo show of Gironcoli outside of Austria. "I can still picture it clearly before my eyes: I was dumbstruck by this grotesque object, by the sheer monumentality of its size, by the smoothness of its metallic surface clashing with the disparity of its formal elements, and above all by the impossibility to reduce it to any given category."

At Mamco, the works of Gironcoli were organized on two floors, one displaying rarely seen drawings and smaller sculptures, the other featuring five large-scale works. Weighing several tons each, these enormous sculptures had to be heaved through the windows by means of cranes, requiring numerous skilled workers, taking up several days' work and entailing considerable costs. The impact of these huge objects within an exhibition space is intense, raising the question of whether and how the floor can support them. At the same time, a certain feeling of lightness pertains to them, because they often touch the floor on only a few points. Thus they almost seem to levitate, as if they were just about to land or depart. In conjunction with their round anthropomorphic shapes, they seem somehow out of place, like humpty-dumpty UFOs. The space at Mamco being narrow and elongated, the idea arose to arrange them in a consecutive row, one after the other, like chariots or floats in a parade. This display highlighted the exhilarating and simultaneously disturbing dimension of the work, as Christian Bernard points out: "I was thinking of bacchanalian corteges. It was a loud and boisterous exhibition."

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An appropriate way to describe these enormous sculptures might be the German expression "*komisch*", which means comical and odd at the same time. Maybe the difficulty of translating this word applies more generally to the work of Gironcoli, which is imbued with an irony very characteristic of the Viennese art scene. Behind their mischievous guise, however, an engagement with existential issues is lurking. The sleek surface of his painted sculptures is invariably undermined by the disquietude of certain recurring elements. Mutant babies burst into flames, phallic symbols and copulating bodies point to the abysms of repressed sexuality, and, most notably in his early works, the use of the swastika and military aircraft remind us of a past but not so distant war. Against this backdrop, the insertion of edelweiss in his later works should not be read as mere camp or ornament, but also understood as a subversion of the Alpine countries' patriotic symbol—whereby the irony is again not missing, since the edelweiss is in fact no endemic plant, but originates from the steppes of Central Asia. The notion of the carnivalesque put forward by the display at Mamco thus pointedly referenced the reversal of order associated with this medieval tradition, during which fools become wise and kings become beggars, making evident the anarchic side of Gironcoli's work.

"In the early 1980s, when I discovered Gironcoli's work, the history of modern art was being rewritten under new premises," Christian Bernard observes. The key exhibition *Westkunst*, an ambitious survey of modern and contemporary art curated by Laszlo Glozer and Kasper König in Cologne in 1981, included for instance the "Période vache" paintings by René Magritte—a group of hitherto little known, crude and intentionally "bad" paintings from 1948, blending art historical references with popular visual culture, that clashed with his otherwise seemingly consistent œuvre—or the "fake" De Chirico by De Chirico. The canonical art historical narrative of modernity was suddenly infiltrated by contradictions. "Within that context, Gironcoli appeared to contribute to this overthrow of a formalist narrative, to reevaluate the imaginary forms rooted within Surrealism." On the same floor as the Austrian artist's solo show at Mamco, Christian Bernard installed a new arrangement of the museum's collection, a "Surrealist cabinet" with works ranging from the early 20th century to the present. Whilst the link to Gironcoli was not made explicit, it was surely nonetheless intended, and allowed for productive mental leaps. Beyond mere formal affinities, it brought to mind the technique of the *cadavre exquis*, or the Surrealists' passion for collecting artworks and artifacts from both Western and non-Western cultures, for Gironcoli was an avid collector himself. He gathered objects mostly from West Africa, but also Chinese ceramics and other artifacts in his private home, which was adjacent to the studio of the academy. In the last twenty years of his life, the initial plenitude of his collection gradually turned into overabundance, and his apartment became a corridor system, walkable only through a set of narrow passages, leading from the kitchen to the bathroom, from the bed to the kitchen, with one cross-connection to the wardrobe—everything else was impassable, jammed with over 400 African masks and sculptures. It all began with a Senufo figure from West Africa brought back as a souvenir by a friend in the late 1960s. It was relatively new, hardly valuable, however Gironcoli took delight in its simple and straightforward design. He became interested in African sculpture and regularly visited the ethnographic museum in Vienna, until he knew its holdings by heart, and because he wanted to see more, he started collecting himself.

Gironcoli attached little importance to the authenticity or antiquity of the objects he collected. He was well aware that the sculptures he found in local community stores and *bric-à-brac* shops (for he never traveled to Africa himself) were not particularly ancient, nor did he make a fetish of them. He had a fond though uninhibited way of handling them; he mounted them on iron plinths assembled from leftovers of his own sculptures, and sometimes even retouched or slightly altered them. When seeing the pictures of Gironcoli's apart-

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ment, one is instantly reminded of a photograph from 1908 showing Picasso in his studio surrounded by African figures, textiles, and masks, or André Breton's home, which housed Modern art by the likes of Marcel Duchamp, Max Ernst, Alberto Giacometti, Roberto Matta and Francis Picabia, but also works by little-known or long forgotten artists, alongside Oceanic sculptures, Inuit masks and pre-Hispanic figures from Mexico. Breton's vast collection, carefully assembled over half a century, was sold in discrete lots at an infamous auction in 2003, arousing much controversy. In his film *The Trick Brain* (2012), Ed Atkins used footage of Breton's apartment made available on a CD-ROM accompanying the sale, the very last record of the collection, addressing the implications of its dispersal. Similar questions might be posed in the case of Gironcoli. After he had to clear the academy's studio and apartment, his sculptures and collection were separated, annihilating the potential of contingency inherent to any compilation of heterogeneous elements. It might be too easy to compare his earliest works, "heads" (1964) made of cardboard or polyester and painted in silver, whose shapes are reduced to a minimum, with the African masks in his collection. It is nonetheless startling to see the encounter of his ethnographic artifacts intermingled with parts of his later sculptures and their baroque-slash-futuristic vocabulary. They belong to different worlds and times, but seem to tacitly relate while scrutinizing each other.

Bruno Gironcoli described himself once as "a sculptor from the millennial Chinese realm and the electric era," and his works can indeed hardly be attributed to a specific movement or particular moment. They seem to exist outside of time, to evoke the past and future without belonging to either, which is exactly what makes them so appealing to the present. Within these blurred temporalities, the notion of repetition becomes significant. In his vast œuvre spanning over forty years, shapes and elements recur, versions are developed in different scales and materials, as for instance with his model *Murphy*, entitled after Samuel Beckett's novel, a kind of spaceship-chair he worked on from 1968 onwards until 2008. Existing works are also adapted, such as *Mother Father*, which is accordingly dated 1969-1982. Furthermore, the idea of the closed circuit is present in his early "electrified" installations, which include serially produced objects from everyday life with laid-bare plugs and cables, anticipating in a way the aesthetics of speculative realism.

It is difficult to pinpoint a manifest impact on later generations, even though Franz West might qualify as an indirect heir, particularly if you think of Gironcoli's *Figure, standing on a single point (Stimmungsmacher)*, a swinging piece from the late 1960s with which the spectator could interact, and the portable *Adaptives* by Franz West, which challenged the very essence of sculpture in a similarly light-hearted way. One might also relate the latter's large-scale aluminum pieces coated in pastel colors that look like papier mâché with the former's metallic-painted works made of polyester. In spite of Gironcoli's long-standing teaching activity, he did not generate a "school." In fact, his former students recall a training method based on autonomy, a free-floating experience within the studio setting where they could each develop in their own way. This doesn't mean he was not important to a younger generation, as Christian Bernard makes clear: "In the 1980s and 1990s, when I was director at Villa Arson in Nice, I frequently invited Austrian artists such as Willi Kopf, Gerwald Rockenschaub, Franz West or Heimo Zobernig. Somehow, Gironcoli repeatedly came up in our discussions. He was not necessarily evoked in a devotional sense, the Viennese art scene being rather tense and ironic, but still he was very much present. Yes, he was clearly a singular and respected figure."