

# A CONVERSATION

## JULY 1990

Juan Munoz/Iwona Blazwick

James Lingwood/Andrea Schlieker

**There are a number of recurring motifs in your work such as floors, balconies, and figures – where do they originate from?**

The floor developed out of a desire to build something that was real, something people could walk across. I wanted to make a real object, not an object that stands in for reality. It was also a necessary device for locating the figure. That figure was sitting on a shelf at that time; the floor becomes like a gigantic prop for such a piece. Yet my figures are that the same time indifferent to the floor, and indifferent to the spectator who is in a sense a performer...

**So the floor creates a participatory space...?**

Well no, it was a device within which to place a figure. At first, works such as the empty balconies were dealing with the absence of the human figure. But I wanted to make a work that stands between two positions – between doing nothing and watching, and passing by and being watched.

**Another early piece, which has an open flick knife attached to the back of the banister, also introduces a sense of violence. The unease is all the more profound, as hand rails are usually a sign of security or comfort, something to lean on.**

Very few people saw the flick knife. I was very interested in this idea of work, inviting your hand to go out, and then the idea of danger, of uncertainty. Do you really need a handrail to go up the stairs or is it just a reassuring image? These banisters are very strongly related to the body and to the passage-way, to going through. They come from that moment when you lean on a balcony. I wanted to flatten the handrails so that they become useless. At the same time, pressed up against the wall like that, they look like a balcony. They even share the same wooden structure at the top.

**The banister attached to the gallery wall articulates a language which is close to that of minimalism. But the switch blade cuts through that language quite violently. Does this signify a general desire to cut through formalist language?**

It is dangerous to make a piece, and then to try to make endless variations of it. You have to put yourself in a position to say it is the last one, and to destroy it.

**Your work is characterized by a configuration of elements rather than the discrete object. There is a unity that is achieved through the “autonomous object” of a classical tradition of sculpture, or a unit of fragments suggested by artists such as Beuys or Kounellis, a tradition which you side with. But now you are discarding certain elements in your work such as the floor, and are going back to making a statue. Does that mean you are trying to create another sort of unity based on a single object?**

I don't seem to be able to make a statue without a base, its plinth. Looking at monuments in the street, the sculpture is made of bronze, the plinth is made of granite, and they end up looking like the whole thing is made of one material. I am not suspicious of the single art object leaning against a white wall, but I could not make the figure without the floor. I could not see the general without the plinth and the cars passing by. It's not so much that fragments are being put together, it is more the impossibility of finding something that has not been fragmented already. I think that the glue of history is so powerful that if you want to separate two parts you will always break something. You can never separate the glueing moment of history, you cannot separate the general from the plinth, from the asphalt, from the cars that pass it by, from the hundred year old trees next to it, from the boredom it represents and from the anonymity which is the consequence of the passage of time.

**How do you relate the drawings to the sculpture?**

This Text was first published in: James Lingwood (Hg.), *Monologe&Dialoge*, Migros Kulturprozent, 1997, pp. 58-67.

The publication was published on the occasion of the exhibition *Juan Muñoz*, February 1st – May 19th, 1997, Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst, curated by Rein Wolfs.

MIGROS MUSEUM FÜR  
GEGENWARTSKUNST  
LIMMATSTRASSE 270  
CH-8005 ZÜRICH

T +41 44 277 20 50  
F +41 44 277 62 86  
INFO@MIGROMUSEUM.CH

MIGROMUSEUM.CH  
MIGROS-CULTURE-PERCENTAGE.CH

To draw is a pleasure, it is a very beautiful, solidary job. I always draw. I never wanted to draw the pieces I was making because I thought they would be like illustrations. So I always try to make drawings that are separate entities.

**Going back to the origin of certain motifs in your work, they seem very rooted in Spanish vernacular traditions.**

Well, I hate the idea of someone saying, "Ah! This is a Spanish balcony." I do not think that is the original source of the work. Of course it is undeniable that Beuys was German, that Goya was Spanish. But this is like an awareness of your own condition. For me the balcony is a reality, not an invention. And certainly for a Swede to make a balcony would be an extremely foreign image, like me making an iceberg.

**But what is interesting is that your work transcends the specificity of place or cultural identity or history. Apart from evoking a particular Spanish Baroque, it also works with a more general typology of form. When you wrote about the Baroque spaces of Borromini you describe them as "Where God is just about to appear, whence He has just departed, of form where His appearance has been absurdly delayed." There is the same sense of absence in your work.**

I sometimes feel that my recent work is about waiting, waiting for something to happen that might never happen; on the other hand afraid in case it does happen, or even wishing that it had never occurred. It is like keeping a work in that state that we would call desire – keeping it at that level of desire, just holding it there, that wish, that uncertainty, keeping the work still just there. Or like watching a door which one day a person might open.

**There's a kind of paradox here, when you introduced the figure with the floor it only served to accentuate rather than retrieve the sense of loss. The figure tends to create a more desolate social space than the empty balcony.**

Well, I cannot make a figure that is personalised. I don't seem to be able to make a person that I know. Because of the "otherness" of figures like the dwarf, I think they create a wide distance between the spectator and the object. About loss, I can say with the utmost arrogance, I have no nostalgia whatsoever about anything. I don't think anything was ever lost. If I deal with the passage of time, it's because I have to grow worm history. My work deals with history, with an awareness of my condition today and the fragments of memory.

**But these are images and spaces that deal with marginalized figures, like your dwarf, or people who are performing for culture, like a ballerina, what are they saying about the state of contemporary culture if it is not about a certain loss or an absence?**

I feel that when I was making the ballerina, it was more about endless moving, but always finding herself in the same space.

**The ballerinas have no legs, they rock on round bases, standing and not standing...**

They are about going nowhere. I was very concerned with the floor, about its relation to the base, about what happens above and below and this seemed the perfect solution. The work is both the solution and the search for it, the pacing about, the working out of a problem. The ballerina is about the possibility of mobbing about and of hope, of conviction and lack of conviction, impossibility, uncertainty...

**Why is that your figures are always approximations of the human body, but never the human itself? There are toys, shadow figures, ventriloquist's dummies...**

It is not to do with toys, but more to do with "otherness." I talked to many friends in Madrid to see if they knew where I could find a dwarf. Someone advised me to go to this bar and talk with a waiter who knew a man called Jorge. I went and left my number and he called me. We arranged to meet. He asked me how he would recognise me, and thought, that's the right question. He is putting me in the position that I am putting him in. In a way, I was terrified by this question. When I cast his face, it was covered in a white blanked and plaster – it made a horrific image. But it would never be him. I would never demean Jorge, or myself. I do not reproduce any real human beings.

**It cannot be coincidence that you are choosing figures, figures such as a ventriloquist's dummy or *The Prompter* that are mute, whose voice you never hear. Is that a metaphorical statement about the human condition?**

Yes, it's true that those works are related to sound and language, or the absence of language. But

MIGROS MUSEUM FÜR  
GEGENWARTSKUNST  
LIMMATSTRASSE 270  
CH-8005 ZÜRICH

T +41 44 277 20 50  
F +41 44 277 62 86  
INFO@MIGROMUSEUM.CH

MIGROMUSEUM.CH  
MIGROS-CULTURE-PERCENTAGE.CH

when I made *The Prompter* I wanted to make a house of memory, the mind you never see but is always there. It is a little like the theater of Giulio Romano or Giordano Bruno, like a stage set with no representation, no play, only one man trying to remember, trying not to forget.

**So what informs your desire to make figures?**

I want to be able to make a man, a man in a room. I want to make an autonomous statue but I don't seem to be able to.

**Do you consider them grotesque?**

Sometimes there is a need to create some inner violence in the work. When I made the first ballerina, I wanted to put a switch blade in one of her hands.

**And what determines the scale of both the figures and the objects? We have talked about monuments but all of the figures are small, less than human size.**

I don't think you can make things the size that you are, they have to be bigger or smaller. I make them smaller because I felt that creates a wider physical and conceptual distance between the spectator and the object.

**I know you resist definition through national traits but these small "grotesque," particularly the dwarf, also have their place in a specifically Spanish tradition, from Velázquez and Buñuel.**

The dwarf is a constant image of the Baroque period. You find it in a lot of Italian painting, even Japanese movies. The dwarf was the only person who could criticize the court. Because of his physical distortion, he was allowed to distort or exaggerate reality. One of the dwarves painted by Velázquez was bought because he had a disease that made him laugh constantly. So they would take him out after dinner and his laughter was so contagious that everyone would laugh and then they'd get bored and send him home. I'm not exactly denying that there's a Spanish link but it's not conscious. The dwarf was born in my work form a walk in a garden in Munich. Rüdiger Schöttle wanted me to make something around an architectural ruin for his Bestiarium project. So I went to this very Baroque park in Munich and picked up a leaflet about the Rococo architect who designed it and discovered that he had been very small in size, practically a dwarf. And then I knew what I was going to make: the image of a dwarf inside the prompter box. *The Prompter* is, in a way, the House of Memory and therefore the ruin that Rüdiger asked me to do.

**Does the language of Minimalism represent a sculptural language of closure for you?**

It's true it was never interesting for me. I came to realize that I could have been walking in a park or drinking in a bar instead of looking at thousands and thousands of little boxes. There was not that much to gain from it. I always felt closer to Merz, Anselmo or Kounellis than to Judd, Andre, Morris, Barry or LeWitt. I think what a lot of people today need is an involvement with the real world. Someone like Judd defined a unity, a common element in art. But Borromini created a different "conceptual unity" to which I am more aligned than the reductivism of the Minimalist project.

**Is your work a response to the crisis of confidence in the language of Minimalism in particular or Modernism in general?**

It is a Mistake to view Modernism as a block without fissures, or cracks.

**But your work does seem like a metaphor for the end of certain period, and the opening up of another.**

Well, I'm always suspicious of dates. I think there were activities which did put forward possibilities, work where there was denial but also affirmation. In a way to make these definitions of times or movements is like the very thinking process of the modernist "central section" which makes these broad generalities. At the same time it is true that a lot of people came into the art world to say there is nothing to be said. And when I first saw in writing that I described myself as being a storyteller, I realized that I might have crossed a bridge.

**So there is a story to be told. You seem to be opening up a different space where you reintroduce aspects of reality or lived experience into the work, into these fissures in the block of modernism.**

It is true that there is a change in sensibility but it's more to do with being bored than with denial. We have become aware of the millions of stories that we did not allow ourselves to tell over the last ten years because of our suspicion of the conditions of expression. Now we know we can express without

MIGROS MUSEUM FÜR  
GEGENWARTSKUNST  
LIMMATSTRASSE 270  
CH-8005 ZÜRICH

T +41 44 277 20 50  
F +41 44 277 62 86  
INFO@MIGROSMUSEUM.CH

MIGROSMUSEUM.CH  
MIGROS-CULTURE-PERCENTAGE.CH

being expressionistic. The doors are swinging open for everything to occur but I don't know how much of the landscape beyond we are actually going to travel. This whole conversation is about the door being opened, but we are not talking about the distant horizon or even the foreground, we are still talking about the door. I can never make art outside of our history. This I know is an impossibility.

**What do you expect to find on the other side of the door?**

Nothing, because my work lacks belief in a way.

**One can trace in your work references to a number of traditions or genres in art such as the still life, and to literary history. You titles even quote certain writers.**

There are authors I have read whose work seems to occur in a silent space somehow. You read Eliot and you have the impression it's a voice in an empty room. I get a similar feeling looking at a work like Seurat's Bathers in the National Gallery. The space between all these people looking at the river, there is such a distance between them all. Everyone is standing so still, and mute. And each one seems to be occupying a space of silence. They are placed with perfect equilibrium between them. Looking at it I realized I wasn't interested in the mathematical formulation behind the work. I was interested in the incredible loneliness of the characters. On the other hand, no pain, no suffering is described, just the condition of each of them. But it is also a relaxed Sunday scene. I thought: this is the image of the soul looking at the desert. I realize I go back again and again to looking at certain images. In the Seurat there is a position of stillness and muteness combined with an incredible transparency. The indifference of the sunny afternoon is paralleled with a tremendous tension. It's going to take me many years to achieve that quality.

This Text was first published in: James Lingwood (Hg.), *Monologe&Dialoge*, Migros Kulturprozent, 1997, pp. 58-67.

The publication was published on the occasion of the exhibition *Juan Muñoz*, February 1st – May 19th, 1997, Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst, curated by Rein Wolfs.

[Link to exhibition](#)

MIGROS MUSEUM FÜR  
GEGENWARTSKUNST  
LIMMATSTRASSE 270  
CH-8005 ZÜRICH

T +41 44 277 20 50  
F +41 44 277 62 86  
INFO@MIGROSMUSEUM.CH

MIGROSMUSEUM.CH  
MIGROS-CULTURE-PERCENTAGE.CH