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In praise of levity
Interview with François Morellet

Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev

François Morellet: I'm very happy to have been part of this twentieth-century art movement. The works were made with minimal materials compared with the huge pieces produced earlier, with their large frames, which must have been very expensive. This is what was new: a light art costing nothing and serving no purpose.

Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev: *'Light' in the sense of costing little to produce, costing little to transport, but also in the sense of light-hearted. Was this a way of distancing yourself from our society of mass production?*
FM: For me, art is quite rightly something that's completely divorced from reality and that interests a very small minority of the population, something joyous and wonderful. I managed to finance my first few gallery spaces, but that didn't last long. After that, I worked in a factory making prams until I was fifty. I'd follow people's tastes, even if they were often quite kitsch. That was life; that's just the way things were. What I do now is marvellous because it appeals to people who are a bit like me. And I make absolutely no claims to being universal, in terms of time or even space. For a number of years now, seeking out that small minority has been the key thing.

CCB: *These days there are so many people on the contemporary art scene. It is very different from how it was in the 1950s or 1960s or 1970s. Nowadays, it seems as though the people who wanted prams are in the museums and galleries and involved in the art world. So the situation is even more paradoxical.*
FM: Yes, but that's life. Life is completely absurd.

CCB: *And looking back to the past, who would you say had the levity, the light-heartedness you're talking about?*
FM: The Romanian philosopher Emil Cioran found the idea of belief systems horrifying and enthusiasm abhorrent. And so consequently, for him, the only bearable periods were those that the barbarians would define as periods of decline: points when no-one believes in anything any more and when there's no longer any truth, short periods ultimately stamped out by "believers". We're now at the end of a period like that. It's difficult to find people in the Middle Ages, for example, who were light-hearted. I remember seeing Egyptian tomb paintings that evoked a sense of freedom, a wonderfully joyous quality. It's possible to find something like that in certain eras, while in others there's nothing. Take for example Concrete Art – Gianni Colombo and me ... there weren't many of us who were looking for this simplicity and precision, and at the same time this light-heartedness.

CCB: *How did you meet?*
FM: In Italy. I'll quickly recap: I didn't go to art school. I wanted to be an artist, but hated teachers. And if I'd gone to art school, I wouldn't have liked it. I made pictures that reflected my own artistic tastes and the things that I saw. In 1950, I made paintings purely for myself – free geometric compositions that I had no intention of exhibiting. That same year, I travelled to Brazil. I wanted to emigrate there with my wife. The Korean War was raging and Joseph McCarthy had put forward a resolution to drop atomic bombs on Moscow and Beijing. A very good friend of ours lived in Rio, so I went there to apply for a visa to emigrate. I met a lot of artists in Rio, most of whom had seen the Max Bill exhibition in São Paulo in July 1950. They explained to me that an artwork must be made in a way that's precise, neutral and systematic, and at the time I was interested in trying something radical that was in direct contrast to Parisian lyrical abstraction. So my wife and I became friends with these young artists. We met a Brazilian, Almir Mavignier, a huge fan of Max Bill, who came to Paris very soon afterwards, in 1951, and stayed there for three years, before? attending the Hochschule für Gestaltung in Ulm. He now lives in Hamburg. Mavignier was mixed-race, very tall, and travelled extensively across Europe on a Vespa. He met Enrico Castellani and Piero Manzoni in Italy in 1959. In spite of our work commitments at the factory, we managed to make several trips to Ulm. I met Bill there, and Friedrich Vordemberge-Gildewart. So it was through Mavignier that I met other European artists. He was friends with Ellsworth Kelly and Jack Youngerman. He met a Croatian, Matko Mes˘trovic´, and together they decided to mount the *Nouvelle Tendance* [New Tendency] exhibition. While touring around on his Vespa (before 1960) he had met Manzoni and Castellani, who ran a small gallery called Azimut underneath a bookshop.

CCB: *You do not mention Bruno Munari. What kind of relationship did he have with Colombo and all the other young Italian artists?*
FM: I don't know much about it. He was very well respected, very well liked and very keen to help young people and produce things for children. He produced a number of editions for children. Lucio Fontana was also hugely influential in Italy. He was so kind it was almost embarrassing. But it was partly because of his kindness that he was so influential. The Azimuth group asked me to exhibit my work, and since we were in the process of forming a group, the GRAV, I invited some of the other artists in the group to take part. And it was at that exhibition in 1960 that I must have met Gianni Colombo. But I really got to know him shortly afterwards. From that point onwards, I kept going back to Italy. Then we met at some Biennials, and then at documenta in 1968. We took part in group shows in Milan and also exhibited with the Gruppo N artists (a group formed in Padua), so we were around each other a lot. And then, in 1964, the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris put on the *Nouvelle Tendance* exhibition, which he participated in too. And he was also at the Zagreb *Nouvelle Tendance* show of 1965. So between Zagreb, Milan, Paris and Padua, we had a lot of contact with each other. I was also involved in an interesting project with Colombo in Holland, in a music-hall theater and in an exhibition in Den Haag in 1982 , near Amsterdam. It was a theater group that put on plays featuring a mixture of video projections and stage sets for which Colombo had made some leaning columns, all inspired by a Dutch philosopher.

CCB: *The umbrella term "Nouvelle Tendance" encompasses Op Art, Kinetic Art and Concrete Art. Where does Colombo, whose work features movement, light, concrete elements, fit in with all of these schools, which are different yet linked through exhibitions?*
FM: Speaking for myself, and it's more or less the same for Colombo, I've been categorized as belonging to the late Group Zero movement, I've been categorized as a pure Concrete Artist in Brazil, Venezuela, Argentina, Switzerland and Germany. In the 1960s, I was classed as an Op artist,

and I think the same goes for Colombo, and that's what's interesting – to have had a very coherent approach and yet to have belonged to one group or another depending on the viewer. Whereas many artists are truly part of a particular movement, with us it's more of a case of what we don't belong to: we're not Expressionists, we're not Romantics, we're not Nihilists.

CCB: *What would you say is the principal characteristic of Colombo's work?*
FM: Its inventiveness.

CCB: *Yes, but that applies to all artists.*
FM: No, no, no.

CCB: *In what sense do you mean then?*
FM: In the sense that he invented things that were different. Space was very important to Gianni. He used space in a light-hearted way, sometimes by exaggerating the sense of seriousness. He loathed seriousness. He wasn't pretentious. And whenever he came across anything that tried to be a little serious, he found a way of ridiculing it. He wasn't necessarily being ironic towards others. When he destroyed exhibitions, he was destroying himself too. It was really humor, not irony.
Do you know about the exhibition we held at the Cenobio-Visualità gallery in Milan in 1971 – three Italian and three French artists? Colombo, Davide Boriani and Gabriele De Vecchi were in one camp, and Joël Stein, Julio Le Parc and I were in the other. It was such fun. We made pictures together. One of us would do a bit, another would do another bit ... We drank a lot, and the weather was hot. The day was purely about being with our friends, laughing, having fun, drinking, eating. There were a few of us from our group, GRAV, and a few from their group, Gruppo T. Some didn't want to get involved because they didn't think what we were doing was serious. There were three serious artists in our group, Yvaral (Vasarely's son), Francisco Sobrino and Horacio Garcia Rossi, and three who were more "dada" – Julio Le Parc, Joël Stein and me. And there were artists in their group, too, who thought what we were doing was in bad taste. It's true, it was in bad taste! But we were friends having fun together, with the aim of making a picture together. One would do a bit, and then another would continue ...

CCB: *Like the Surrealists.*
FM: It was the same principal. And the results were dreadful. But spending time together was such fun. And there was another side to Colombo. I can talk about it now. It's not a secret any more. We have three sons and the youngest is gay; we're very open about it. Colombo was also gay. But it was touching that, even with us, when he knew we had a son who was gay, he didn't talk about it. That's a bit how Italy is. I like people who are sensitive. He kept himself to himself and he was completely right to do so. We can talk about it now, because it's no longer a secret. For me, it also represented his more mysterious side.

CCB: *His work has a nocturnal, secret quality that I like a lot, a nocturnal sensuality that's perhaps linked to this slightly secret world.*
FM: Yes, yes ...

CCB: *There's something tactile about it too. The early works make a lot of use of sensual materials. But going back to this aspect of levity, is it about being anarchic? Is it an anarchist philosophy?*
FM: Anarchy is also very serious-minded.

CCB: *There's the anarchist slogan: "Have a nice day." It's sweet, but it's also serious.*
FM: First and foremost, it's about avoiding the kind of profound truths proposed by Catholicism, Protestantism, Islam. And so, of course, it's about avoiding the impetus to believe in something serious that makes people kill each other. It's about being light-hearted and frivolous.

CCB: *A bit like Matisse, then?*
FM: Yes, yes, you could say that. The rest is so awful – it's enough to make you want to kill yourself. But most importantly, it's not about developing a theory based on escape, avoidance; it's about remaining light-hearted without turning it into something serious.

CCB: *But the art of groups such as GRAV, Gruppo T, Gruppo N, etc. was considered very serious by contemporary critics.*
FM: Yes, yes, all very serious.

CCB: *And so the written criticism about the work of the kinetic artists is much more solemn.*
FM: Oh yes, they were very serious. Gruppo N died because of politics. You can't imagine the political pressure we were under in the 1960s and 1970s, even in the 1950s. If you said that you were apolitical, you were called a fascist. This point isn't made strongly enough. In Italy it was like France, but things weren't so severe in other countries. The pressure was felt throughout intellectual circles. My father was a bourgeois. He'd been a radical Socialist, he was absolutely not interested in Communism, but he made me learn Russian because it seemed a foregone conclusion back then that within ten years the USSR would have caught up with the USA. My father wasn't joking when he made me learn Russian: he actually thought it would save my life. There were the first Sputniks, the space race, and the USSR's rising production figures showed that its economy was booming. It should also be said that the Italian Communist Party was much more open than the French Communist Party, which was more strictly modeled on the Soviets. We didn't want to be French Communists; we wanted to be Italian Communists.

CCB: *But politics are inherent in the very form of the work. If we agree that the most important experience of the work isn't the artist's, but the viewer's – that's a very political stance.*
FM: Yes, of course. And being in a group is also a political statement. I wrote a text with François Ménard, who was in our group to begin with, in which we set out to demonstrate that we were the real politicians because we were combating individualism.

CCB: *And subjectivism. The work is also political, not in the sense of how society should be organized, but in the sense of an individual, personal, emancipated political standpoint. If you consider that people have to be passive when looking at an Expressionist painting, doesn't that express a political authoritarianism?*
FM: I'm thinking of the exhibition at Azimut. When I was in the GRAV group, my aim was to make visual art that was not signed by any one individual. And we made at least five or six collective works. But if we claimed to have no political opinions, we were considered extremely right wing. We had to be Communists, or Anarchists, or Maoists.

CCB: *Why didn't Colombo figure in kinetic art to begin with, even though he was already exhibiting his work in 1959 and 1960 in Italy. And why did it take him so long to arrive on the international art scene later than the Latin America scene?*

FM: We preferred the Brazilian mindset to the Argentinean. That was it, basically. What Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica were doing in Brazil went largely unnoticed back in Europe. They really were Bill's *enfants terribles*. While in Argentina, there was more of an exchange with Europe. Tomás Maldonado and Victor Vasarely were the most influential artists in Argentina, whereas in Brazil it was Bill rather than Maldonado.

CCB: *Alexander Calder also made an impact on the Brazilians. He arrived there very early on, in 1948– 50, and exhibited his work there. But returning to my earlier question, why is Colombo less recognized on the international scene than you are?*
FM: Because I'm older. He was born in 1936 and I was born in 1926. And if he were still alive, things would be very different today. What's more, he didn't produce many works, which means that he didn't make a huge impact on the market. For Colombo, the main thing was the places, the *ambienti*, environments, not the artworks themselves.

CCB: *When you talk about your conversations with Colombo, you've said that it was like making pirouettes. The pirouette combines the discipline of dance with jumping, which is absurd. Is this what you were referring to?*
FM: I think that there's a very small, select group of artists who combine a liking for precision (in direct contrast to Romanticism or Expressionism) with a taste for the absurd – in whom the two co-exist. We egged each other on down an absurdist route. We were messing around, trying to outdo each other.

CCB: *Oh, I see. The expression of individuality triggers a sort of desire to emulate. It's like a pingpong game.*
FM: With each one going further than the other. And in the end there's nothing left and you set off again in a new direction.

CCB: *But in what direction did you push each other further?*
FM: Towards the absurd. Into the ridiculous.

CCB: *Into word games. Which language did you communicate in?*
FM: In French. He spoke very good French.

CCB: *Why?*
FM: Out of consideration. And because we didn't speak Italian. That's a good reason! So we could utter absurdities, play word games, create palindromes. He spoke better French than our other Italian friends.

CCB: *And did Colombo come here, to Cholet?*
FM: Yes, yes. For example, we were both in Kassel in 1968, and I asked him, "What are you up to?", and he replied "Well, I'm going back to Milan." And I said "Listen, we're going back to Cholet." And that was that. He hopped into our car and came back with us to Cholet and then he took the train. We'd go for walks by the sea, along the Atlantic coast. We'd go swimming in Sainte-Maxime.

CCB: *But what did he like to talk about? What subjects? Literature? Music? Jazz, for example?*
FM: We talked about everything, not just art. He'd tell us what was going on with his friends. We

discussed fashion. He loved film and went to the cinema all the time. He'd talk about exhibitions and tell us what he'd seen, and we'd tell him what we'd seen and heard. He told us about exhibitions in Italy that we hadn't been able to get to because we lived relatively far away in France. We used to talk a lot about the art we were doing and about other artists, but in a light-hearted way. He was opposed to seriousness, he was opposed to people who played at being geniuses. He was opposed to the idea that artists couldn't be understood, that they were a breed apart, that as soon as they go to art school, with all the fuss made over them, they become different people with a depth and vision that can't be understood. We, Colombo included, could be understood. We showed people how we worked, we showed people how interesting it was to distort a space without making a mystery out of it, without playing games.

CCB: *Without creating an "aura". Demystifying things. In Italy there's a fierce debate surrounding the restoration of the* Strutturazioni pulsanti*, the works informally known as the "walls", made up of polystyrene "bricks" that move. Gallery owners and collectors are arguing over whether or not these pieces of polystyrene should be replaced when they break or turn yellow with age, because it's not a very durable material.*
FM: Yes, of course they should be redone as perfectly as possible, just as Colombo would have wanted them to be redone. Colombo wouldn't have liked them to have looked all yellow and old. Definitely not. Of course, if we're talking about something that's been directly made by the hands of a genius – you can't repaint a picture ... but in the case of people like Colombo or myself, who maintain a certain distance from the production process, then of course the pieces should be replaced!

CCB: *So he was against the artist's aura, but on the other hand, there was something theatrical about the photos he took in private. The anti-serious also has a clearly defined history that can be traced back to Alfred Jarry.*
FM: It's a very recent history nonetheless, involving a very small minority. When we first saw Colombo with his dark glasses and pin-striped suits, he looked a bit like a gangster in a thriller, and our first impression of him was the exact opposite of what he was really like. He was acting a part: the American gangster.

CCB: *But this type of irony and this desire to "be a pain" came out of a sort of resistance to the feeling that in the twentieth century you couldn't "be irritating", that you had to be dramatic, showy.*
FM: Yes, absolutely. I tried to justify it by saying that it showed respect for the spectator, who could modify a work and who knew the rules of the game. It was a more socialist, participatory approach.

CCB: *But "being a pain", "being annoying" reflects a desire to rebel against the century's productivity ethic. Was this a skeptical stance?*
FM: It was also a very British form of elitism. I think that the British were the most civilized people of Europe. Indifference was a very aristocratic trait: indifference to death, to pain. My attitude could be seen in the same way: the attitude of someone who's had money, who doesn't need to sell his paintings and who makes art that doesn't draw large crowds. So we're like that, indifferent. Cioran said: "When an individual loses the power of indifference, he becomes a virtual criminal" and for him, indifference and frivolity were the only defence against the folly of belief.

CCB: *But was Colombo in the skeptical camp too?*
FM: Yes, very much so. He could imbue a restaurant, pointless things, with importance.

CCB: *And now? Is there anything from this period that's still active for you?*
FM: For me, it's a case of acting with a clear conscience. Now, if I feel guilty about anything, I'd say that the work I did in 1953, with three vertical and three horizontal lines, was elitist.

CCB: *Again, it's a paradox and maybe a game. Thank you.*

Cholet, May 20, 2009