

**Interview by Luigi Martini to Vasco Bendini published in
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You have never given any interviews in all these years

I would like to explain why I have never done so. The rare ones that have so far been published are taken from conversations or phone calls. So they are not reliable. A painter, a sculptor, a musician or an artist of any kind finds it difficult to express himself through words. An artist spends hours and hours in his study not meditating on the words to use, but thinking, feeling in the only way which comes natural to him, that is, through forms, signs, rhythms, colours. Take me for example: whenever I find myself in front of a sheet, a canvas, which are almost impalpable infinite planes, in silence, I follow with my hand the images that gradually take form: To improvise with a tape-recorder in front of me is unnatural for me.

Who were your teachers?

Guidi and Morandi, and I consider myself lucky. Guidi was a great master. During the war the Academy in Bologna was actually closed and, for one year (1941-1942) there were only three of us at the Academy: we two and a janitor. Guidi worked in his study, I in the painting classroom. Each now and then the Maestro came to see me there and we had long conversations about my work and Italian and foreign contemporary art.

Morandi was a very reserved person. He would not talk if not urged to. His answers were always very short. However, he was very concrete, he insisted a lot on technique, in a very simple way, almost like a craftsman; his love for his instruments was so strong that we young people considered it too extreme.

However, his meticulous passion for technique was not an

end in itself; from Morandi we learnt that without any apprenticeship it was not possible to answer our expressive needs successfully. But the most important teaching Morandi really gave us was his example as a man with a strong moral integrity. It is difficult today to understand why he was excluded from the Venice Biennale Centenary considering that, besides being one of the greatest European painters, Morandi is among the most significant and conscious protagonists of the early XX Century.

What was the cultural climate like in Bologna in the '40's when you were a young painter?

Painters showed interest in the ideals born from the anti-fascist struggle and in the social conditions of the working classes.

But the situation was changing so fast and violently that even the beautiful neorealist films which were being shown in the cinemas mirrored a society in extinction. The rapid socio-economical and cultural change brought about a reality which many artists were not conscious of and they did not know how to respond to it promptly, concentrated as they were on recalling a lost world or one that was disappearing.

In those post-war years many of the works created by artists which had been inspired by workers' marches or by the anniversaries of political organizations were soon destroyed. What does this make you think of?

These events underline the true significance given to those works. After all a party's aim is political and propagandistic: the artists had the aim of informing society. This attitude can

be seen also, for example, in the history of the Church which did not have any problem in commissioning frescoes and eventually destroying them, as we can see in Raffaello's case, when the Church believed that his works had exhausted their aim or that they represented an outdated religious stance.

You were a young artist in 1948, when, after the exhibition held in Bologna at the Alleanza della Cultura, Togliatti wrote his article on «Rinascita». Many people told me that in the conflict between abstraction and figurative art, the trade unions did not side with any "faction". Is that so?

I can talk about the trade unions of the artists in Bologna of which I was part. The debate on abstract versus figurative art was so radical that it was like a war between good and evil and these two "fronts" continue to come up to the surface. For me, as a painter, the struggle was between "Execution" by Guttuso and "Laceration" by Burri. When I looked at "Execution" by Guttuso I understood that the emotions and the images belonged to the past; when looking at "Laceration" by Burri I found myself before a tragic image of free forms and at the same time necessary to express a deep sense of an unprecedented, devastating tragedy

Was it then that Arcangeli tried to support a research trend which could deal with the relation between man and nature in a new language of visual arts?

Yes. Arcangeli's poetic illumination had the ambition to go beyond the relation of contemplation of nature giving it a more existential sense, thus overcoming that prejudice which made man feel inferior to nature.

Inside this "not improbable" position of Arcangeli there were various views: I felt the need to affirm myself as part of nature, but also making everything that was inside and outside of me vibrate in a cosmic sense. It was necessary, however, to understand to what extent the traces of the traditional language I had received, which had sedimented over the years, could be renewed acquiring a precise expressive value.

You stayed on in Bologna until the end of the 60's. Can you remember any particular meaningful initiatives of the Artists' Union?

In January 1969 we held an important union exhibition, the first and only one which was completely political. There was an oppressive sensation in the air: the «Prague Spring» had been suffocated by the Soviet tanks and by the troops of the Warsaw Pact. The Union decided to organize an event involving artists and the people to express their dissent, suspending for some time every activity of theirs. As a form of extreme protest against that infamy I planned to bury myself in a crystal container full of dung in Piazza Maggiore, breathing only through a cannula.

Did you accomplish that form of denunciation?

No, because in the meantime, in Prague, Jan Palack had committed suicide by setting fire to himself, and that gesture of his underlined the inadequacy and naivety of the performance I had planned to carry out. So I changed my mind and I realized an action of estrangement and of isolation at the Civic Museum in Bologna under the title of : «I. And I now».

When you describe the experience of the first post war years you refer to the difficulty of the artists to find a language which could translate the people's tragic condition; what is the present situation of the world of the arts as far as the existential condition of mankind is concerned?

The situation remains desperate and it surprises me that artists still exist, no matter whether figurative or abstract, who continue to work for purely commercial, decorative reasons, simply to remain on the market and to acquire prestige. Nothing has changed since the 40's.

It's a huge tragedy and there are only few, isolated artists and people of culture who are, above all, not listened to. I feel as if I were assisting to a theatrical representation in which the actors play their roles without any enthusiasm.