

Michael Fliri in Conversation with Fabio Cavallucci

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Fabio Cavallucci: I would like to conduct an interview that establishes a relationship between art and life. Would you like to begin with art or with life?

Michael Fliri: With life.

FC: Then I would like to talk about your journeys first. Where would you like to go, where have you been, and which are the places you visited more frequently?

MF: Since I come from South Tyrol, from a border area, I have always been curious about going in opposite directions. To study, I first went south to Bologna and then north to Munich. The Erasmus program gave me the chance to go even more north, to Bergen in Norway. Later on, thanks to various artist residencies, I was given the opportunity to visit places such as New York, Paris, and Antwerp. I really like to travel and discover new places.

FC: So the point is going in opposite directions which have something in common, though. This immediately reminds me of one of your most important works: the performance you re-enacted not long ago at the Centre Pompidou, *Come out and play with me*, that shows a transformation from sheep to pig and vice versa. The performance is based on the idea of being two completely different animals which appear one after the other. I think that this work contains a lot of your later development: the interest in animals, the idea of transformation, the idea of switching from one situation to another, from one place to another, of turning from one being into another. Would you say that this work marks the beginning of a path you are still following?

MF: Absolutely. I firmly believe in processes. As regards this work, I am not really interested in the sheep or in the pig, but in what happens in between. For instance in the moment confronting the spectator with a creature with two heads or an animal with another animal's paws, etc. This is a transitory situation without certainties that defies any immediate rational understanding. In short, I am interested in moments that permit a naïve view.

FC: You live in Vienna, but were raised in Taufers im Münstertal/Tubre, a small village in the mountains at the border with Switzerland. How is life in Vienna, do you feel like a stranger from the mountains or have you become a perfect part of the city, completely at ease with it?

MF: I would say that the mechanism we just talked about is at work here, too: I love nature, but I also love the city. I need both, a place to unfold my ideas without being disturbed and a place where life carries me away.

FC: I have asked you this question because many of your works feature out-of-place figures which you incorporate yourself. I am thinking of *From the forbidden zone*, for example, which you realized at Bolzano's Museion in 2009. The work presents you as half man and half animal, as a sort of monkey in the middle of the museum on the night of an opening. You are sitting on the floor, you are part of the event in a way, but you are also very isolated, keeping to yourself. You are under the scrutiny of the public, people are watching you, but you are also watching them: you resemble a fairground animal, an animal that usually lives in the forest and has been taken into town in a cage. You are something strange, an exhibit that draws attention. You apparently enjoy presenting yourself as out of place.

MF: I do not take myself too seriously, and I do not give too much importance to my existence on this planet. A large part of life is based on uncertainty and doubt. This is why I am quite attracted by these ambiguous characters and am very comfortable in their skin.

FC: The other element about these characters is that they undergo some trial – and frequently fail. Trying to come to terms with a difficult situation, they do not always succeed. I remember Let love be eternal while it lasts, for example, when you climb a snowy mountain with stilts, but at a certain point get stuck in the snow and cannot go on. I think that the idea behind it is that one's entire life is a trial. And that we are aware that sooner or later we are bound to fail. Which makes me think of Svevo who said that life is a disease cured only by death.

MF: Exactly. A trial means being active, doing things, moving. Nevertheless I see failure in a different way. These characters are neither heroes nor anti-heroes. Although they do not succeed, they never lose. They even cannot make mistakes: the action, the body, and the environment are in a state of balance. Thus, failure has no bitter taste, but shows you that there are constraints, natural constraints, and once you understand and accept that your life becomes easier.

FC: Every trial is followed by a transformation which you often present as a form of molting, of shedding one's skin like a snake. The new snake is identical to the old one, but something has changed, the old skin has been left behind. Much of your work tackles this topic: transformation as molting. Do you identify with these two concepts: the concept of trials on the one hand and the understanding of transformation as shedding one's skin on the other?

MF: These concepts offer enormous opportunities and advantages. They do not describe possibilities, but actually provide them. The first degree of abstraction begins with shedding the skin I wear every day, meaning my clothes. This new experience puts me on the line, exposes me to new situations and challenges, allows me to put myself in the place of new figures, and, above all, to express new feelings.

FC: You are aware of being an actor on the stages of both life and art. In the work you presented at the Generali Foundation in Vienna, Give doubt the benefit of doubt, you brought to the stage what happens behind the scene. Or am I mistaken?

MF: No, you are right. Nothing is separate in this work, everything happens on one and the same level: taking on another person's role, the make-up, the preparation, rehearsals, the dress rehearsal, the final presentation, and the performance. Everything takes place at the same time. I am interested in letting my work breathe. I do not rehearse before shooting a video. I am always very curious to see how my body reacts, what it does, what it decides – it is like watching it from outside without really knowing it.

FC: Can you think of some artists who are of particular interest to you? Whose work did you find inspiring during your years of study?

MF: I do not like ranking lists, which is why I find it difficult to come up with names. But there are many. And they always change. I like brave artists, artists who change but, at the same time, follow their path. In art school, I studied the work of Marina Abramović, Joseph Beuys, and Bruce Nauman, for example.

FC: The reference to Abramović, Beuys, and Nauman suggests that your point of departure was that direct relationship with the body – which can be seen in your work: the artist being

in the midst of things, taking action, creating a work, being the work himself. From the very beginning, you have incorporated this figure in a cinematic and theatrical dimension by taking an external, an ironic point of view. Even if not aware of the futility of the undertaking, so at least aware of the fact that the artist cannot really change anything. Though the artists you just mentioned certainly showed some courage, they could not change the world. Your very first work, *Der Schneemann*, features you as the central figure realizing a performance with your body; you are thus part of the work or perhaps even the work itself. Yet behind it there is that ironic awareness that it is a performance, an act. Am I right?

MF: Irony helps me tackle situations. It is a means, a filter, a useful interpretation. I construct stories or systems of stories; the idea is central and the rest follows. In the case of *Der Schneemann*, I started off with the material, with snow, although it was actually polystyrene. I wanted to become the material; I did not want to distinguish between the artist and the material. That is why I became a snowman. In the video, you see the snowman first before his environment emerges, built with the material the snowman is made of, and in the end the snowman disappears, merges with the surroundings.

FC: Right, the snow . . . Your childhood images remain with you throughout your entire life. Some of your works deal with snow. Was there that much snow in Taufers?

MF: Yes, there was. We already mentioned two works in this regard. Returning to *Der Schneemann*: I might have been afraid of exaggerating with a too naturalistic reference and thought that using real snow would be a bit too much. I needed something abstract like polystyrene. Only years later I decided to use real snow in *Let love be eternal while it lasts*.

FC: Another element that recurs in your work is water. In a way, it is also an extension of the idea of *Der Schneemann*: being immersed in amniotic fluid, which you have created yourself and which moves around you. I am thinking of *Early one morning with time to waste* and of the video with the ingenious title, which is nearly impossible to pronounce: 00°°°°00°°00.

MF: Shooting 00°°°°00°°00 underwater was fascinating. The video is based on the idea of living underwater instead of being surrounded by air, of being confronted with new forces – with inverted gravity, to be precise. There is no above and no below any longer: water creates new rules. In *Early one morning with time to waste*, water was an immense liquid, without boundaries, but one could guess its proportions by the horizon. In 00°°°°00°°00 I found myself without any point of reference, without direction, completely alone.

FC: The idea of gravity or of the absence of gravity is something that is very present in your work. We often see someone falling or rising – it is losing one's points of reference or sense of gravity you focus on.

MF: When I was upside-down underwater, my brain took a few seconds to adapt before giving me the information that, although I was upside-down, everything was all right, or rather, everything was normal. It adapted immediately. This is why I always have the feeling that everything could be quite different.

FC: I would like to talk about another very important feature of your work: the mask. On the one hand, the mask belongs to the thematic complex of transformation: we do not know who you are, you are who you appear to be. The background for this is the idea that there may be another mask behind each mask. On the other hand, the mask is very much part of a popular tradition and related to one's images from childhood. Am I right?

MF: In the village where I grew up there are many celebrations for which people dress up. These celebrations suggest that you can escape reality for a while. In South Tyrol, there are

two main annual festivities: one is Carnival, which is amusing and playful, the other Saint Nicholas Day with its Krampuses, which is a very brutal time with devils roaming the streets and punishing people – the eternal fight between good and evil.

FC: You started off from performance, from the idea of bringing life into the theater, into art, but in the last few years you seem, at least partly, more and more interested in structure, in sculpture. Your work clearly reveals this fascination. How do you combine these two aspects: performance and sculpture?

MF: In *Ways around the urschlamm* I captured eight moments of the transformation of my face into that of a cow. The individual stages of this metamorphosis are horrifying, almost diabolical, but I turn out a peaceful creature in the end, a cow. No process is linear: we are confronted with situations in which we make decisions that we have to carry out. Another example is *Bilateral symmetry holders*, a work that comprises the positive and the negative form. Liquid latex is applied onto a piece of clay on the floor; once dry, it turns into skin: being removed from the two-dimensional form, it becomes three-dimensional. Almost like two frames, open and closed, two- and three-dimensional. Even the space in between becomes part of the sculpture. This is why it remains in motion, as it were.

FC: For me, this is the very idea of sculpture. Originally, sculpture was nothing stable, it was performance. I imagine that mankind's first sculpture was a totem around which people danced. It was part of an activity, not something to look at from afar in a passive way. Your idea of sculpture reclaims much of this original meaning: sculpture as rooted in an activity, as an experience you make and communicate to others. Concluding the interview, I would like to ask you whether you are more interested in understanding yourself or in communicating something to others?

MF: I might not even believe in being able to learn something or communicating something to others. But who knows? We will see. I am always ready for surprises.