

Giorgio Morandi Joseph Beuys



Imaginary Dialogue

31 March - 28 May 2023
Via Massimo D'Azeglio, 15 - Bologna

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Imaginary dialogue

curated by Alessia Calarota

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Unexpected similarities unfold from the dialogue between a section of Joseph Beuys' production and a part of Giorgio Morandi's work, protagonist of Morandi's art as well as painting.



The exhibition **Joseph Beuys - Giorgio Morandi: Imaginary dialogue** explores through a new lens part of the artistic production of two leading characters of modern and contemporary art. Surprisingly, a major synergy comes out, despite a difference in age (they were born more than 30 years apart), personalities and places.



Shy, but not isolated, Morandi (born in 1890) was almost ascetical in his discipline. Whereas, **surrounded by a very active social and political life, Beuys** (born in 1921) used to represent himself as a modern shaman. At first sight, they seem to only share a bucolic **passion for nature**. Morandi used to spend a long time in Grizzana, a small town on the Tuscan-Emilian Apennines. Here he designed and built his humble house, in which the only luxury his studio had were many big windows, used as camera lens on the outdoor landscape, which he never got tired of replicating in abstract forms. On the other hand, Beuys blended himself with nature and with the use of it in an all-encompassing

manner, in his performances as well as in his works. They were some kind of **prophets**, able to walk a lonely path in the art, each in his own way. In both cases, although, a big mark in history has been made, not only because they were both Fine Art Academy professors, Morandi in **Bologna** and Beuys in **Düsseldorf**. As protagonists of his works, Morandi chose common and simple objects, such as vases, bottles and subjects we all know - **landscapes, flowers, shells** - just like Beuys picked up poor and simple materials - **felt** and **fat** - or daily life materials like **copper**. Besides the big media differences - while Morandi painted, Beuys did performances or made sculptures - an affinity between the two becomes evident.

Art historian **Cesare Brandi** wrote:

«There are painters for whom etching is a secondary road, a holiday from painting: for other painters etching becomes the heart of the pictorial form itself [...] among them is Morandi as well. Starting from his first etchings - a 1913 landscape demonstrates it - painting and etching show the same stylistic issue with an equal dramatic precision; **therefore neither painting nor etching replace one another**».



From an article on "Comunità"
published in 1946

Indeed, at **Sao Paulo Biennial in Brazil, Morandi won the first prize for etching**. Beuys was on the same page: **he upgraded editioned works as his art's preferred media**. As he himself said in Schellmann catalog:

«I'm interested in the distribution of physical vehicles in the form of editions because I'm interested in spreading ideas. The objects are only understandable in relation to my ideas. The work I do politically has a different effect on people than it would have if the means of expression were the written words because such a product exists».



Art, life, political activism for the disruption of the established social order – that in Beuys' vision can be reached through every human being's individual expression creativity – are linked together. This is where Beuys comes from, while Morandi's research focuses more on shape:

«as painting is born beyond the sight of a color hiding its true self, meaning in the seal's own physical and earthly echo, **etching is pushed beyond black and white grid pattern** [...] now the traits clear bar lines – chasing each other like rain drops – thicken or thin out the **light** coming from the back, and the intertwined weave filters through glass thickness, it lights up flares, it generates light **shadows** that settle, fleeting like a passing cloud on slightly sketched objects shapes».

To Morandi etching is pure light research, expressed at its full power through a denser or rarer trait until it becomes absent. If etching allowed Morandi to express light's blinding power with a means that could not be reached in painting, Beuys worked with grey and unusual materials such as felt.

If asked, he would declare his intention to evoke a colorful world – as in the case of the complementary color phenomenon where if you stare at red and close your eyes, green appears – but he would also point out that his goal was to create an anti-image with the help of this element consisting of:

«**evoking a lucid world, a clear, a lucid, perhaps even a transcendental, a spiritual world** through something which looks quite different, through an anti-image. Because you can't create an after-image or an anti-image by doing something which is there as an **anti-image** [...] so it isn't right to say I'm interested in grey [...] I'm interested in a process which leads us away beyond those things».

Joseph Beuys in *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* (1965)

Likewise, returning to Cesare Brandi's words, to Morandi etching:

«is pushed beyond **black** and **white** grid pattern to make use of implied colors, bending the hatching not only to express light and shade or shadows, but to suggest **gradations of chromatic intensity** and even diversity in tone [...] The pure whites intensity reveals some place else a **midday light so blinding** that suddenly it graduates into an **impressive variety of dusky and ochre colors** strongly pigmented on the piled up objects, standing out from a mysterious background. It almost feels like that through hatching those colors adapt step by step in the ground's substantial density».

Etching study is at the root of painting and the two of them are so reciprocal that

«**hatchings resumptions in etchings** equals to **brushstrokes overlapping**; even where the paper white emerges in pureness - both as color or light - its value of chromatic area undoubtedly declares its heritage from painting [...] Morandi was lead to transfer the same reduction of the chromatic medium to two tones into oil painting».

The use of hatching by Morandi to create an "anti-image" as Beuys did - but made of light - as well as Beuys' research on warmth are the root of this exhibition that allows a direct dialogue among the two artists.

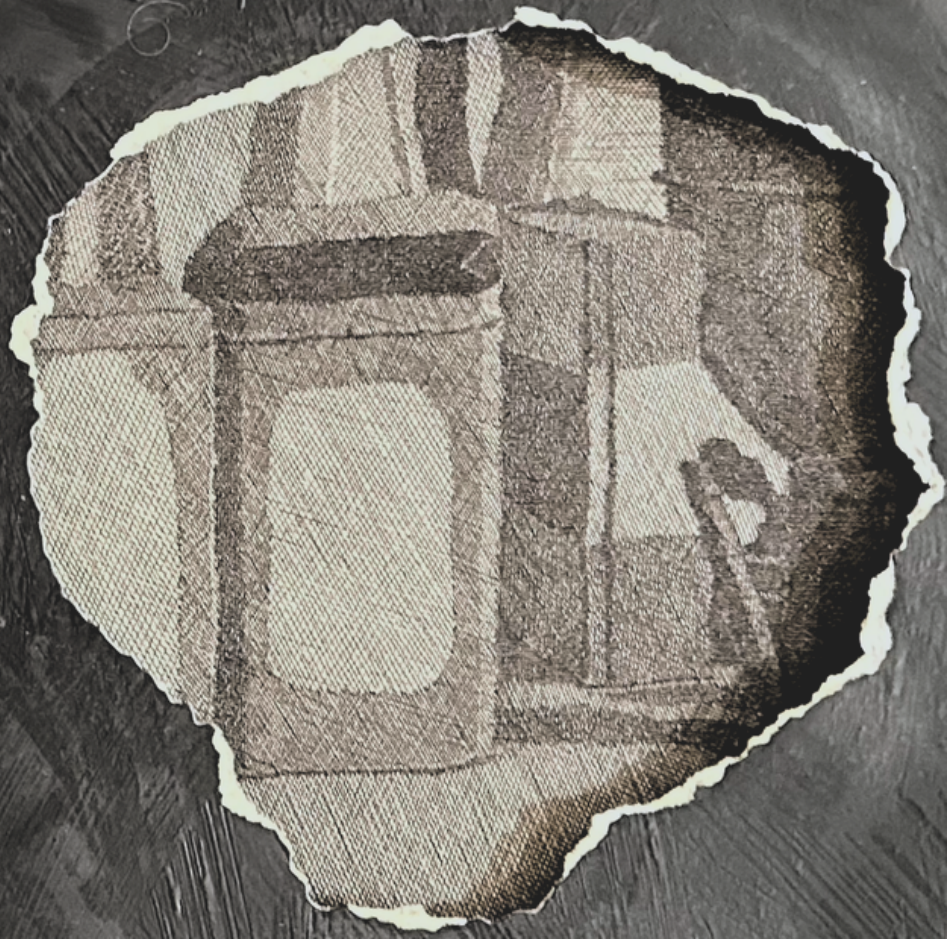


The research starts with **Morandi's etchings** and goes on with his **drawings** and **watercolors** up to a major **Natura morta** on canvas where the reduction of the chromatic medium to two tones is strongly implemented. This oil painting is a milestone in Morandi's work. Then, his etchings are compared with **one of the most iconic editions of Beuys' work**.

In fact, this editioned artwork is part of the permanent collection of the **Tate** in London and the **MoMA** in New York. In Beuys' choice to create editioned works lies their implicit role as carriers facilitating messages diffusion as well as the idea of a "**democratic**" art, available and accessible to as many people as possible.

The work **2 Shafsköpfe** (2 sheep's heads) - that can be found as a two-piece drawing in London Tate permanent collection - is the model for **90 handmade single originals** dated **1961-1975**. One of them is **Galleria d'Arte Maggiore g.a.m.'s**

Painting Version 69. The oil on paper has a hole in the centre; on the oil two shapes are noticeable and their outlines suggest two sheep's heads, traced on the grey painting with animal fat.





Joseph Beuys in *I like America and America likes me* (1974)

The presence of the sheep is not surprising, considering the substantial amount of works by Beuys in which animals appear. For example, *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*, but also the *Aktion* - as Beuys liked to call his performances - *I like America and America likes me* (1974, New York), where

Beuys locked himself in a cage with a **coyote**: he wrapped himself in a large piece of felt to protect himself; only having a few tools, he spent three days close to the animal, trying to earn his trust. Choosing the sheep has also a **spiritual meaning**, as the sheep has been used as a **biblical symbol** of God's people of which he is the pastor.

In conclusion, using Beuys' own words: «By repeating the same thing, something is evoked in some kind of recoil process», as in his production concept of warmth. He underlined:

*«Not even physical warmth is meant. If I had meant physical warmth, I could just as well have used an infra-red light in my performances. Actually I meant a completely different kind of warmth or the beginning of an evolution [...] So, **warmth as an evolutionary process**».*

Light and warmth, an imaginary dialogue among two main characters of art history who used a non minor technique, that is the protagonist of their work, even when **editioned**.