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Transcript #64 Massimiliano Gioni Wants to Do Away with Quality



Guest Massimiliano Gioni. Photo by Matthew Magelof

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Charlotte Burns: Hello, and welcome to *In Other Words*. I'm your host Charlotte Burns, and today I'm joined by Massimiliano Gioni, who is the artistic director at both the [New Museum of Contemporary Art](#) in New York and the [Fondazione Trussardi](#) in Milan.

He's also the curator of the exhibition "Appearance Stripped Bare: Desire and the Object in the Work of Marcel Duchamp and Jeff Koons, Even", on view now [at the Museo Jumex in Mexico City](#) until 29 September.

Massimiliano Gioni: *At one point, I realized that more interesting things happen when I could do away with notions of quality and taste.*

Before we begin, here is a quick reminder to subscribe to our *In Other Words* newsletter at [artagencypartners.com](#). Now onto today's show.

Charlotte Burns: Massimiliano, thank you very much for joining me today.

Massimiliano Gioni: Thank you.

Charlotte Burns: Is it true that you were a paid doppelganger for the artist [Maurizio Cattelan](#)?

Massimiliano Gioni: Yes. It's a well-known fact, you didn't research much! There's even a movie about it.

[Laughter]

But yes, I met Maurizio in 1997. At the time I was working the editor of *Flash Art Magazine* at their offices in Milan. I met him because I was asked to interview him. The interviewing process with Maurizio was both entertaining and very painful, because he had a file of answers by other artists that he had enjoyed and found interesting. So, whenever you asked him a question, he would scroll down the document and say, “Oh, I have something that [Warhol](#) said, or I have something that [Francesco Clemente](#) or [Cady Noland](#) said.” And he would quote from another source.

So, we did this interview. I guess we hit it off.

Then he told me, “Today I have to do an interview with the national radio. Would you want to do it?”

And I said, “What do you mean?”

He said, “Well, I’ll just give them your phone number, and they’re going to call you, and you’re going to be me.”

And I said, “Okay.”

For many years, actually, I did interviews as Maurizio. I wrote all his artist writings, any statement, press releases. I was the voice of Maurizio for many years.

Then our projects together became a little more complicated, meaning that they required two of us to be in the same place at the same time. And at that point, it became a little more difficult for me to be...

Charlotte Burns: A doppelgänger.

Massimiliano Gioni: Yes—two people at the same time. That’s how we kind of trickled off. It was a great learning experience for me. It was also something that frankly helped me financially when I came to New York.

[Laughter]

Yes, it was a great adventure.

Charlotte Burns: You collaborated with Maurizio in several ways as you just mentioned, one of which was in founding [the Wrong Gallery](#), which *the Guardian* newspaper called “[the greatest little gallery on earth](#)”. It was a one-meter squared space in Chelsea that you founded with Maurizio and with the curator [Ali Subotnick](#) in 2002. It was a very fun space; it didn’t take itself too seriously.

Massimiliano Gioni: The space was something that was borne very much from Maurizio’s curiosity and enthusiasm. Of course, I’m partial, but he’s a very special artist in the sense that he’s quite voracious in his curiosity and because a lot of his work has to do with playing the system, he’s an artist that occupies different roles.

At the time, Ali Subotnick was an editor at [Parkett](#). I was an editor at *Flash Art Magazine* here in New York, and I was also starting to do more curatorial work. We would spend hours and hours just looking at art, all the time together.

Maurizio just started thinking that we had all this information and he found it to be a waste that we weren’t doing anything with it. I guess that’s one of Maurizio’s greatnesses—and also something that artists understand sooner than others—to somehow turn everyday life into something.

He realized that we were all doing this work, and we might as well somehow share it. We had two ideas: one was to start a magazine, which was called *Charley* and was a magazine without any fixed periodicity. We would just do it when we wanted it. The idea was that each issue should be the pilot for a potential magazine, and they should feel as do-it-yourself as possible.

Around the same time, we had this idea of opening a space. It was a moment, also, when Chelsea was exploding. There were still a few galleries in SoHo, but the transition to Chelsea was happening. The original idea for Maurizio was to have a space—which would have been a fridge abandoned in a lot—and you would go and open the door, and there would be an exhibition inside. We learned sadly, or fortunately, that you cannot have a fridge with a door in New York City, because apparently children can get locked inside. So, we abandoned the fridge idea.

And then Maurizio one day was walking around in Chelsea, and he saw this recess in a wall next to what at the time was [Andrew Kreps Gallery](#) on 22nd Street. He just had this idea that we could have bought an aluminum door, a kind of standard Chelsea gallery door, and put it in front of the recess. By doing that, we could have created a space and have our own gallery. Also, immediately, we thought of course of [Duchamp’s door](#) that opens and closes at the same time. We thought of [Gordon Matta Clark’s](#) abandoned lots, when he bought spaces between buildings.

So, it seemed irreverent enough to be playful, to be light, and yet somehow stratified with many ideas. The name actually came when [Jeffrey Deitch](#) said, "I love in New York when you hear from people, they say, "Oh, that's a great show, but it's in the wrong gallery."

Charlotte Burns: That's so good-

[Laughter]

Massimiliano Gioni: —which is a very New York, mean thing to say. So we said, "We can be the wrong gallery." That's how we started.

The idea, we used to say, was that it had to be a "zero economy". So, everything was to be gifted or bartered or loaned. Artists were always super generous and enthusiastic. We showed [Isa Genzken](#); [Elizabeth Peyton](#) did a special exhibition for Valentine's Day; [Paul McCarthy](#) with [Jason Rhoades](#) did a Christmas window—they sent fairies to the gallery front. [Lawrence Weiner](#) did a beautiful piece, which in a sense also captured what we were trying to do: they were stencils that said "give and take". Those were spray painted around the streets of Chelsea, obviously illegally.

After a while, we expanded. We got another space down the street, so we had another—

Charlotte Burns: Wasn't that the plan at some point, to be as big as [Gagosian](#), but just in very, very tiny lots.

Massimiliano Gioni: Small lots, yes. And then wrong was spelled backwards, which was another small homage to Duchamp and the [Rongwrong magazine](#). We had two spaces, and then eventually we got evicted. I guess we were amongst the first victims of the transformations of Chelsea. But either miraculously or because of Maurizio's enthusiasm, we were hosted by the [Tate Modern](#), which I know sounds pretty crazy.

Charlotte Burns: You came to art from books. You grew up in a town outside Milan, and you had three shocks you said, around the time you were 15. One was [Lucy Lippard's](#) book *Pop Art*; Lippard's *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*; and then [Germano Celant's](#) *Arte Povera*, which was published in 1969. All of those books have been published a couple of decades before you came across them.

Massimiliano Gioni: Sorry, I was late.

[Laughter]

Charlotte Burns: You couldn't help that, I guess that's what you call birth. You said the people in the books, they were heroes but from a different planet. Can you describe that sense of discovery?

Massimiliano Gioni: Not that it matters so much, but the discovery of the *Pop Art* book was a little earlier than that. It was between secondary school and high school. There was a shock in the sense that I saw reproductions of [Warhol](#) and [Rosenquist](#). It's a great book, which also has chapters, I think, on South American Pop Art and global Pop Art. So, that was exciting, particularly, in the dilemma which I realized it was perfectly naïve of me to have, of whether or not the artists were criticizing the world of consumption and the world of consumerism.

As a kid, I do remember clearly thinking, "Are they saying it's good or bad?" That dilemma, in a sense, came to signify something for me about art: that the dilemma was unsolvable. At the time, I was just trying to be Solomonic, I guess, about it. Then I learned that maybe the contribution of art was specifically that complex.

The Dematerialization of the Art Object and the *Arte Povera* book I encountered a little later. I went to study in Canada, of all places.

Charlotte Burns: Was that an exchange program?

Massimiliano Gioni: No, I won a scholarship in the school, which is part of the United World Colleges. Every year there are 100 students from all over the world and that was of course a very exciting experience. There I had more access to the art section of the library that was maybe more sophisticated or more international.

The Dematerialization of the Art Object is a crazy book, it's basically a compendium. It's just an incredible object. You can keep going back to it and try to understand it over and over. The *Arte Povera* book is more visual, there are a lot more pictures.

And it's the 1960s, and everybody looks so rebellious and great, somewhere between a pirate and a Franciscan saint, with drugs.

[Laughter]

It just seemed, I don't know, very exciting.

Charlotte Burns: That appealed to you?

Massimiliano Gioni: Yes. Again, it was this... indecision, not being able to fully understand it and process it.

Around that time, I had encountered the writings of [Breton](#), of [Tristan Tzara](#), of the Futurists, and they were all people that were telling me it was okay not to make sense. That was quite a liberating experience. It was nothing that was taught in school, so it was something I came to by myself. That felt like a discovery, and it felt—

Charlotte Burns: —That you could make your own way?

Massimiliano Gioni: —Yes. And that these people were strange, for lack of a better word, in a way that would have welcomed the strangeness that I felt was mine, or of my friends.

As cheesy as it sounds, you also overlap with what at the time was called “alternative music”, you know, [Vito Acconci](#) doesn't look that different from Lou Reed on the cover of a [Velvet Underground](#) record.

Charlotte Burns: That's how you come to things though.

Massimiliano Gioni: I always say that I saw my first Richter on [the cover of a Sonic Youth](#) album, rather than on a book or elsewhere.

Charlotte Burns: I wanted to ask you a little bit about this idea of the underground and the mainstream, because you've spoken about that time and you said, “There was a moment in the 1990s where the idea of the underground and the mainstream completely dissolved. I'm nostalgic about it, but I can also say, sadly, that Kurt Cobain was taking the same drugs before and after Geffen, and the music was also great before and after, and he reached out to more people.”

You were talking specifically about that in the context of the New Museum, which you said was emerging through a similar transformation. You've spoken about the idea of nonconformity and conformity in the art world, too, saying that there's a lot of conformity in your profession and you have to work against that. How do you keep that spirit as you get older?

Massimiliano Gioni: How is it— “You are born an arsonist, and you die a firefighter”? That's a terrible metaphor these days. I don't know how you keep that. Part of it is that the artists and exhibition-making keep you somewhat in check. Because no matter how many shows you've done in your life, when you go and meet with an artist to work on a show, he or she first of all believes—typically, even the most modest—that he or she's the best expert in the world. So, you have to start from the beginning every time. You can come with a lot of experience, a lot of luggage, but it's a perennial learning process. I guess that keeps your ego in check. It forces you to try every time to restart your knowledge.

Of course, you have more experience, maybe you can pretend more how to dance a little better. I do think that aspect of exhibition-making is quite special. It can be a humbling and also difficult experience because sometimes you just want to say, “Look, I've done this. We're okay.” But most of the time you have to start from the beginning, and that keeps your freshness of spirit.

When it comes to the question of underground and mainstream, it's a question I felt biographically as a direct experience. Oversimplifying, that's what the 1990s seemed to me. I've worked, for example, with many artists who are a little older than myself: [Maurizio Cattelan](#), [Sarah Lucas](#), [Pipilotti Rist](#), [Nari Ward](#).

When you talk to them, their experience was so much more nonconformist in their education, for example. None of these people that I mentioned, maybe with the exception of Nari Ward, went to a proper art school. They got to art school after living in the squat house, or going to night school, or hanging out with bands. I don't know if I'm romanticizing, but there was a tradition of, let's say, alternative culture that was still very much alive at one point in the 1990s. And that then—I don't know if it happens to everybody, maybe it's just a biographical change—but I witnessed at one point that transformation, that dissolution, which of course forces you to retrace your bearings in a sense, or anyway understand that you cannot capture that and if you do, you look like those fake punks in fake Berlin in a fake squat house. That would be a little bit depressing.

So, you have to move on, or understand that there are other things you can do. You can use a larger audience, for example, maybe in creative ways. You also have to understand that maybe opposition and integration are more malleable than you thought.

Charlotte Burns: What do you mean?

Massimiliano Gioni: In the sense that there isn't a clear us and them, which is a problem that also many artists have visualized in the last few years. It's relatively easy to think, “you are the us, and the other are the enemies.” I think if

anything, this transformation lends to having more complicated and richer ideas, rather than narrow-mindedness. I don't know if that answered the question.

Charlotte Burns: Yes, I think it leads me to a different question I have for you. We did [a special issue looking at the metrics of success](#) for museums. We spoke to different museum curators and directors. It had all sprung from an article that I had read in which Okwui Enwezor was [interviewed by Der Spiegel](#). We went on to interview him ourselves. That was so interesting that it spawned this greater conversation about how you measure success.

One of his concerns was the idea that bringing in a large audience as the standard definition of the success of an exhibition was problematic in times of shifting politics; that the idea of popular can shift into populist and becomes a slippery, and potentially dangerous, slope. I wonder about that, too, the idea of popular and populist. Do you think about that?

Massimiliano Gioni: I do. This also connects with the work I do in Milan with the Trussardi Foundation, which we define as a nomadic museum. It doesn't have an exhibition space. For every show, it changes location and venue depending on the exhibition, depending on the wishes of the artist, often realizing works outdoors and in public space. I think that experience, for example, has taught me that—and maybe this goes back also to the romanticism of the avant-garde as I imagined it growing up, with those books—you have to keep the integrity of the artwork in its confrontational nature, no matter what.

I'm not a fan of public art that becomes polite for fear of offending the many, or for fear of being in a public space. In that sense, maybe I stayed a punk.

Even when working in the public space, I think you owe it to the artwork and the artist to not dilute the complexity of the artwork. If you don't dilute the complexity of the artwork, I think at least you know you are not catering to the audience.

I would be naïve, and I would be lying if I told you that I don't care about how many people come to my shows. Of course I'm happier if more people come to a show. Sometimes I'm sad when a show becomes just a selfie ground—you can't even see the art, because you're just looking at people taking photos. That's the experience in most museums of certain popularity nowadays.

But I think as long as you can tell that the artwork is not being compromised to cater to a minimum common denominator of a phantom audience that is actually mainly just imagined by marketing experts, that's okay.

Charlotte Burns: Two of the shows that have recently been at the New Museum that you were responsible for overseeing the curation of—the [Nari Ward show](#) and [Sarah Lucas](#)—both were exhibitions of artists who made works that were sort of iconic works in the 1990s.

We did [a podcast with Nari and Derrick Adams](#), and it was really interesting to think about the way in which it was infuriating how relevant the works were. That these works that were made in the 1990s about the AIDS crisis, about gentrification, about the problems of real estate, and racism and systemic injustice, felt incredibly pertinent to today, all those decades on.

Massimiliano Gioni: It can be depressing in the sense that the problems are the same. To me, which is always exciting when you work on a show, you start with certain ideas. There have to be some polemical points in the show. In the case of Nari Ward—which is also a collaboration with my colleagues, [Gary Carrion-Murayari](#) and [Helga Christoffersen](#)—one of the polemics was to show Nari as a crucial voice in the expansion of contemporary art, and particularly in making art more cosmopolitan to a national and global audience, which was another major shift of the 1990s.

The second was to show Nari as one of the most important artists of that time, to shift from individual object-making to installation, and environmental installation.

And then of course there was a subtext about New York City, and Harlem and Manhattan's changing identities over the past 20 years. So, you start with certain hypothesis or ideas, or polemical points. And then, when you do the show and finally, when you see it installed, it's also quite exciting because many other ideas become apparent.

One of the most surprising revelations for me with the Nari Ward show was seeing how an artist who was in his 30s in the 1990s was making a piece like [Amazing Grace](#) (1993), or [Hunger Cradle](#) (1993), or more recently the [T.P. Reign Bow](#) (2012), which is this tower.

A young artist in New York City was making works that were so large that nobody could even dream of buying them. As you go through the show, I think it's quite remarkable in the sense that his definition of art, and what an artwork can be, is so physically vast. It doesn't seem preoccupied at all with, "where am I going to put this? It's got to go over the sofa."

He says this had a lot to do with, on one hand, the impact of biennales—that was the space where he was making art in the 1990s—and then the impact of the non-for-profit artist-run spaces of which his own fire station became a symbol and a locus.

So I think that was very refreshing and, in a sense, also depressing, because if I think of younger artists today, there is a narrowing of what an artwork is because it's a lot more portable and a lot more discreet. It incorporates, if not the sellable quality, at least a sense of discreet unity, which a lot of...

Charlotte Burns: It's more graspable.

Massimiliano Gioni: Yes.

Charlotte Burns: And physically. Someone once said that to me, a curator. I ran around an art fair once, and I said to this curator from a New York museum, "What do you think of this art fair?" And they said, "It's cash and carry art. You can pay for it and walk out." I always thought that was an interesting way of thinking of the conservativeness of a market, and of a taste, of a time.

You've spoken about this a little bit when you talk about the value of art. In [an interview with the Wall Street Journal](#), which is also—

Massimiliano Gioni: The paradox I dwell in.

[Laughter]

Charlotte Burns: You said, it was in 2013: "Lately people just think that contemporary art is something that's past the time of the wealthy, or because everybody else is doing it, or because openings are cool and fashionable. We need to remind ourselves that contemporary art is first of all a form of conceptual gymnastics, in which we learn to coexist with what we don't understand." Do you think that's still the issue that's being grappled with?

Massimiliano Gioni: Absolutely. I also discovered—I thought I had borrowed that sentence from [Umberto Eco](#), and then recently I was reading [Gombrich](#) again and he said something similar. They both speak more about perception: art is the place where we exercise perception to learn to look at the world. But I think for me it's more about the space where you come to terms with what you don't know. I don't mean it in the sense of the unknown, the great unknown, but more with being faced with an object that comes probably with its own rules. Your role as a viewer is to engage with them and activate them and learn about them. And that process of interpretation and learning is obviously also a process of self-knowing.

That is true, and I think necessary. We are seeing so much of, for example, discussions around identity. I think in that sense, also, art is a training ground for exchange and learning between ourselves and the "other", to use a terrible term. Yes, I absolutely believe that's true.

When it comes also from the market, there is a lot of slamming against art as a playground for the wealthy. But I also see it endlessly every day with so many artists, and so many curators and colleagues, there is more social mobility—and for this I can probably be criticized—but there is more social mobility in this world than there is in the world of my sister or my brother or my parents.

Charlotte Burns: In what way?

Massimiliano Gioni: People can transform themselves and their lives more in the art world than they can in any other job, in any other life. That I strongly believe, and I strongly believe it's something we should remind ourselves: that it's not just a social place for the wealthy to look good, but that it is certainly more porous than many other environments. Or at least it has been for me.

Have you seen where Caravaggio was born, or where Borromini was born? They're not great places and we still know their names.

Charlotte Burns: One thing that [Allan writes about a lot](#) in our newsletter is this idea of the increasing efficiency of the art world, and how that leaves less room for mobility and complexity and innovation. Do you feel the same way, or do you feel there is still that bandwidth?

Massimiliano Gioni: I can't complain about the professionalization of the art world, because in a sense the curator as a proper professional figure is a result of hyper-professionalism of the art world from the 1990s until today. I grew up—and that goes back to those books—I grew up without even knowing the word "curator". Then curators became something, somewhat in the 1990s, more publicly.

In a sense, I guess I get the benefits of that hyper-professionalism. But in many of my shows there is a cult of the autodidact, which maybe is a projection of some biographical longings.

I do believe also that it's important to remind ourselves that art is a place where the nonprofessional can exist, and where actually the dilettantism is, if not prized, at least welcome or still possesses a destabilizing power.

Charlotte Burns: This comes back to what you said about conformity and nonconformity.

In your [Venice Biennale](#), you were the youngest curator of the Venice Biennale in more than 100 years. [The New York Times](#) called you a “biennale veteran” by the time you were 38, because you’d already directed the [Gwangju Art Biennale in South Korea](#), the section called “La Zona” at the [50th Venice Biennale](#) in 2003. You co-curated the fifth edition of [Manifesta](#) in 2004, you organized “[Of Mice and Men](#)” in the Berlin Biennale in 2006. And then of course, the 55th Venice Biennale in 2013.

At the time, there was a huge amount of attention around that Venice because “The Encyclopedic Palace” was the title and you mixed high and low, insider and outsider, dealing with hyper-connectivity and this idea of the synchronicity of the past, present and future.

Massimiliano Gioni: You’re always, what is the saying, a dwarf on the shoulders of giants. Whatever becomes somehow symbolic is also the product of a more pulviscular change. In a sense my biennale was evidence of many changes that were happening. For me, it was the result of a few biennials. Particularly the one in Gwangju served as a preparation—not that I knew, but it ended up being a research version of Venice and fed into Venice.

Charlotte Burns: In what way?

Massimiliano Gioni: In a few personal revelations that are still informing a lot of my work. First of all, this is my... it’s not a decalogue, my pentalogue. First of all, the exhibition is not interested in taste and in giving license of quality to what is included in the show. That was a big revelation for me, which took time. In the first part of my career—I guess I can start dividing it that way—I thought my job as a curator was to choose and to point to quality. I realize it’s a slippery concept, because I might offend a few people. But at one point, through the study of other people’s exhibitions, and exhibitions that I found particularly complex and interesting, I realized that more interesting things happen when I could do away with notions of quality and taste.

I realized, particularly, that’s what artists were doing every day and also what artists curating were doing: [Mike Kelley’s “The Uncanny”](#) or [Robert Gober’s “Meat Wagon”](#), or I think back to Duchamp and many of the Surrealist shows, and so on. I think those shows signal this significant shift, where exhibitions in which notions of quality and taste were non-relevant. That also led me to another step, which was that in an exhibition I could include not necessarily artworks. I could include objects of visual culture or material culture. That came with opening so many possibilities and doors, because the exhibition then could tell more complicated stories. It was less homogenous in size, in scale, in materials, in media.

It also didn’t look anymore in the same way that museums look like, there wasn’t this sense of the isolated masterpiece, or the sense of importance that comes—

Charlotte Burns: —Religious, secular.

Massimiliano Gioni: It’s basically the other side of it, that market mystique, the self-importance of the object. Everything became... even the masterpieces became both more modest, and I thought more present, because they were no longer self-important and so removed.

I think those are the big shifts that occurred to me at one point, of which the Gwangju Biennale was a test on a scale, it’s—

Charlotte Burns: Huge. Very different size than the Wrong Gallery.

Massimiliano Gioni: That would be I think 15,000 Wrong Galleries.

[Laughter]

That was an interesting shock, which then resulted in the Venice Biennale. But it’s more that I try to look at artworks as expression of culture, and that is both an exercise in modesty—but that I think amplifies their importance, paradoxically. Because you don’t treat them with reverential attitudes. But that is the ultimate form of reverence. Because you just recognize that they are important to your everyday life, in a sense. They’re important not just as a visual entertainment, but as part of the expression of culture.

Charlotte Burns: Do you collect?

Massimiliano Gioni: Not really. I buy lots of books. I wish I could say I’m a collector of books, but I’m not that good. I’m not systematic enough, but I have lots of books. My dream is to have 80,000 books, which was the number of books that [Warburg had](#) when the library went to London. It will never happen, maybe I’ll get to not even a couple 10,000s or so. I have some artworks, but not a collection. I wish. I’m always in awe of people who can do so many things, I don’t seem to.

Charlotte Burns: That’s quite funny, because I think of you as a multi-tasker. You have jobs at two institutions, you organize biennials, you work on lots of prizes. One of the questions I wanted to ask you was, how do you juggle all of that?

Massimiliano Gioni: You work with very good people. It's crucial, and it's great when you can work with the same people through time, because then communication is much faster and efficient, and you know how to communicate without any ego or any issue. I think the importance of a team is crucial.

I always say, exhibitions are a form of collective intelligence, and I don't say that just to be nice to the people I work with.

The other is to work a lot. It's like Carnegie Hall: how you get there is practice, practice, practice.

Charlotte Burns: It's the 10,000 hours of the Beatles.

Massimiliano Gioni: I think that's the only suggestion I have.

Charlotte Burns: Keep going.

You talk about... One thing I thought was interesting is that lots of the standard advice about the art world is to be of your time. You don't make shows of people you know, you want to make shows of people that you want to get to know, whether that's dead artists or outsider artists.

Massimiliano Gioni: Which means I probably won't last very long, because it's true. If you think of the great curators, they are the ones that were the voices of their generation. Even though I work with many people of my generation, and I work with many of them early on and multiple times, I always thought that was a little too predictable in a sense and that my responsibility was also to get to know what I didn't know.

But it was a way for me to play outside of my league, or to think that it had to be an opportunity to work with people I didn't know.

I think of my work, and I think of the institutions and exhibitions as instruments. I know nothing about music, but I think your responsibility as an exhibition-maker—as a professional in the world of museums—is to expand the range of the instrument you play. For me, just to do shows with the artists of my generation would be a very narrow use.

Charlotte Burns: One note.

I guess one of the themes of this conversation is this idea of nonconformity, of standing outside, of looking elsewhere. Do you feel that you came to the art world as an outsider? And do you feel that you are still an outsider?

Massimiliano Gioni: Will I be thrown tomatoes at when I leave from here? I don't know. I'm not exactly the person who right now is considered nonconformist, but I think that's also a very restrictive essentializing, as people used to say, "notion of identity". I came to art because it was something that was not taught to me. I came to art because it was an ideal freedom of weirdness, of rebelliousness. Then of course, now I'm also somewhat of a bureaucrat that works for a functionary, so I don't know if I'm exactly eccentric enough.

Charlotte Burns: Does it still represent those things to you, that freedom, that weirdness?

Massimiliano Gioni: Yes. The encounter with any new artwork is always an encounter with that strangeness. The effect of being foreign. One of the shows I did was [the first New Museum Triennial](#), which at the time we described as the "generation art", because it was really born out of sheer anxiety from myself finding that I wasn't in touch with a new generation of artists. That experience was very much encapsulated by the encounter with [Ryan Trecartin's](#) work.

These videos, these people who are speaking literally a language that suddenly seems incomprehensible—that you have to rewire all your knowledge, culture, self, to understand it. And that, I firmly believe, is the great experience of art, every time.

Charlotte Burns: That rewiring. You talked about this idea of being a bureaucrat, and obviously the New Museum is in the process—the staff at the New Museum are in the process of creating and discussing a union. Is that something you can comment on?

Massimiliano Gioni: The union is being voted in, and we are in the process of negotiation and it will take its course. There isn't much else. It's something that belongs to the realm of organization, more than to the realm of art.

Charlotte Burns: We began the show by talking about the Marcel Duchamp and Jeff Koons exhibition in Mexico, can you tell me a little more about that?

Massimiliano Gioni: If I were to be overambitious, I see the show as an occasion to look at the role of objects in the 20th century. That sounds maybe grand, but you have two artists in a sense at the beginning and the end of the 20th century, with Jeff obviously having a place also in the 21st century.

The central question is actually a question that Duchamp asked himself in one of his very cryptic notes in 1913. He writes

this note in which he talks about the question of shop windows hiding coitus behind a sheet of glass. Clearly, he identifies the relationship between objects—particularly commodities, sexuality, and the exchange of the individual with these objects of desire—as a defining character of life in metropolitan cities in the 20th century.

These questions were amplified and taken on by Koons even further

There are many other sub-themes and ideas that the exhibition explores. One of the central ones is the idea of identity as a medium for the artist in the 20th century: the invention of alter-egos, the construction of identity, the publicity machine around the artist and how that can be played with or transformed. The idea of the self as a performance, and the idea of the self as a company. Both artists have imagined themselves as forms of incorporation and this is an idea that I borrow from [David Joselit](#), who writes about “the self incorporated” in Marcel Duchamp.

The exhibition presents and includes all the 14 ready-mades that Marcel Duchamp remakes in 1964. Famously the ready-mades were created in the beginning of the 20th century, but all of them mainly lost.

What happens at that point is the readymade gets remade, and the readymade, which we have always assumed is a common object is in fact a sculpture that is made, and in many cases made industrially or artisanally to resemble an original industrial object. This mysterious identity of the ready-mades is a strategy that Koons develops further through the whole idea of replicas and facsimiles.

So, the show is looking at what objects have been, and why and how. It looks at the problem of identity, both in the object and in the artist, and in also in the spectator in the sense of the original, the replica, the copy, the facsimile, which are all different ways of existing that these artists pose as a crucial question in contemporary art and in the culture of the 20th century.

Charlotte Burns: That’s a lot.

Massimiliano Gioni: I read recently this interview, a very candid interview with [Rosalind Krauss](#), who says anybody who really gets too much into Marcel Duchamp goes crazy. So hopefully that’s not the beginning of the end.

Charlotte Burns: Massimiliano, thank you so much for coming in today.

Massimiliano Gioni: Thank you.

Charlotte Burns: For anybody who has the time, inclination, or travel miles, please go to Museo Jumex in Mexico City and see this exhibition. Or if you’re in New York, the New Museum, or the Trussardi Foundation—wherever that is next.

Massimiliano Gioni: Thank you.

Charlotte Burns: Thank you so much.

Massimiliano Gioni: Thank you.