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(testo inglese)

Jonathan Borofsky

Together to build our world

interview by **Leda Cempellin**



Your earlier exhibitions looked like spontaneous arrangements of a vast array of figures in diverse media, drawings scattered on the floor, including a participatory component through the insertion of a ping pong table for the public to play. Later on, you moved outdoors with individual or small groupings of silhouetted figures like *Walking Man* or *Molecule Man*. How did this happen? Let's make the link between your earlier work and what you are doing now.

«In the Seventies, I was collecting my thoughts about life, humanity, my own psychology: who am I, why do human beings act the way they do and what kind of symbols can I make for myself and others to reflect these thoughts and feelings? Usually my installations contained many different elements, and the way I held them all together was with a sequential numbering system. What seemed to be a very chaotic installation was actually controlled by this one system. Within those installations, occasionally very personal images would show up, like the *Hammering Man*, which I used as a symbol of the worker in *all of us*. Symbols like this one first began to show up in my early installations as drawings, paintings and plywood cutouts. Somewhere in the late Seventies one collector asked if I could make a large metal *Hammering Man* sculpture for outdoors, and this began the process of me taking my personal and archetypal imagery and producing it for outdoor public situations. To be able to translate a very private image that began as a small personal drawing into a public setting became a nice challenge. My theory has always been: the more I can reach inside myself to find something deeply personal, the better chance I have to create a symbol that can touch everyone in a meaningful way. We are all pretty much the same – we all have the same hopes and fears».

Your written numbers are often very large – sometimes in the millions. Are they in sequence or random, and why? «In 1967-68 I gave up all painting and sculpture to focus on my inner mind. I would count from 1 to 10 over and over again as a sort of meditation, and usually write the numbers down on paper. This was repetitive, and it turned out to align at the time with Conceptual Art, which was developing in Europe and the United States simultaneously. At one point, I decided to just start from zero and keep counting towards infinity and see for how long and how high I would count – maybe a year, or two years. The numbers were hand-written: every day I picked up the counting

process where I left off the day before. At some point, that rigid kind of conceptual control started to get in the way of my need to make visual psychological and personal imagery. I started making very small drawings and paintings again, and every time a work was completed, instead of my normal signature, I signed it with the number that I was on in that particular day in my counting meditation. This was a way of merging my need for structure with the figurative».

Have you been using such numbering in your more recent public sculpture as well? «That particular linear counting system faded into the background around 1990. Every once in a while I do still apply a number to a particular work, just because it ties me back into that system. However, in the last 15 years I've merged the structural into the figurative with my Human Structures sculptures – where the figures bolt together, hand-to-hand and head-to-foot, to create a perfect modular system».

By themselves, your figurative sculptures like the *Hammering Man* and *Walking Man* are isolated and giant. Yet, as each perform their actions, they share our human space. How do you consider this interaction during the planning process? «When I get approached by somebody to do a public project, I naturally study the scale of the surroundings: is it in the wide open park situation, or are there many buildings around? Will the public be walking or driving by? The *Hammering Man* in Frankfurt is 21 meters tall, and stands in front of the Messeturm (one of the tallest buildings in the city). There are thirty thousand cars driving under the motorized hammering arm of the sculpture every day. So, if you are making symbols for people to think about or feel, sometimes a larger version clarifies what you are trying to say».

Let's talk about the symbolism related to the *Hammering Man*. There are many versions located in several places around the world besides Frankfurt: Seoul, Seattle, Basel to name a few. What does it mean for you and what do you hope it means for the places where you put them? «I mentioned that the sculpture is a symbol for the worker in all of us. Each of us uses our hands every day, either to build a bridge, make food for our children, swipe across a computer screen, or even make art! We are all in motion as we build our world. To create the *Hammering Man*, I considered one of the most archetypal images I could think of: a person, maybe an original worker on the planet Earth, who picked up a stick, tied a stone to

1. Jonathan Borofsky, *Self-Portrait*, 1980
Photo credit: Megan Williams, courtesy of the artist.

2. "Hammering Man"
2002, 22 meters tall, painted steel, electric motor Heungkuk building, Seoul, South Korea, courtesy of the artist.

3. "Walking to the Sky"
2004, 100 feet tall, stainless steel pole with 10 realistically painted life-size figures, temporary installation, Rockefeller Center, New York, USA, courtesy of the artist.

4. "People Tower" 2008, 20 meters tall, 128 interlocking painted steel figures (bolted together hand-to-hand and head-to-foot), Olympic Park, Beijing, China, courtesy of the artist.

it with some animal hide and made a tool. Eventually, I considered the idea of having several *Hammering Man* sculptures all hammering in different places around the globe at the same time. We are all working together to build our world».

Is there a particular reason as why *Walking to the Sky* was installed temporarily at Rockefeller Center in 2004, before being moved the following year to the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas? «Public Art Fund has a program where they invite different artists to exhibit work in New York City for a period of time. I was one of many artists who was invited over the years. We agreed on *Walking to the Sky* because it was a new work for me at the time and Rockefeller Center is a very exciting, energized place, where visitors from all parts of the world are walking in all directions».

What is the meaning of this image? «When I was maybe 5-6 years old, I used to sit on my father's knee. The story I remember him telling me over and over again was about a friendly giant who lived in the sky; my father and I would go up to meet this giant and discuss what could be done back down on earth for people, to help things out. Moreover, in my early years, my mother (who was both a painter and an architect) always had art magazines sitting on the coffee table in the living room. The title of Gauguin's famous painting caught my attention: *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* To read that title as a child, it just sank right into me. Art could be about these philosophical questions, and I could make symbols of what I was thinking about and what I was feeling. In *Walking to the Sky*, the people walking on the pole are all of different nationalities and genders: I am referring to all of humanity. I gave it a poetic title, but maybe it could have been Gauguin's title as well».

Are you using computers now to draw the outdoor sculptures?

«Absolutely: for any of these large outdoor sculptures today we use 3D CAD software to design the work and to understand it structurally. These larger works require extensive engineering, including wind tunnel tests and seismic studies, the same way a tall building does. The *Human Structures* sculpture in Beijing is about twenty meters tall, and we definitely need computers to calculate how these 136 figures perfectly bolt together in a modular system, hand-to-hand and head-to-foot, and how to make a strong structure without any welding. The figure is used as a structural element, like a brick or a building block. It is another way of expressing the idea of many parts coming together to form onewhole».

