

Press Release 27 January 2017

Enrico Baj: Play as Protest

Saturday, 4 February through Sunday, 14 May 2017
Opening Sunday, 5 February, 4:00 pm

- *Enrico Baj: Play as Protest* is an overview and reintroduction in The Netherlands of the work of the Italian artist Enrico Baj (1924 – 2003).
- His work is playful and colourful, but at the same time a sharp critique of society and of those in power.
- In addition to being an influential artist with a clear affinity for anarchism, Enrico Baj was a prominent voice in Italy's intellectual and artistic circles up until his death.



The Cobra Museum of Modern Art in Amstelveen presents an extensive selection of works of the Italian artist Enrico Baj (1924-2003). The exhibition reintroduces this free-spirited artist's work to The Netherlands and includes over 100 works dating mainly from the 50s, 60s and 70s.

Enrico Baj's works look playful, colourful and humorous, but simultaneously show his sharp socio-critical, even anarchist, attitude. André Breton, founder of Surrealism, admired Baj's perfect balance between the two poles, likening his work to "a device set to sound an alarm and yet, at the same time, to spread joy." Baj himself stated that "*only fun can validly oppose the system*". Baj used play as a form of engagement and creation as a form of protest. His work was a critique of fascism, totalitarian systems, the power of the ruling class and the potential annihilation of the environment (the then new nuclear threat). The exhibition shows how Baj playfully used the strategies of satire and deliberate disrespect as means of protest against a society that seems to be on the constant verge of self-destruction.

The exhibition *Enrico Baj: Play as Protest*

Baj developed a highly original visual language with assemblage paintings that simply burst with the pleasure of making them. Just like the CoBrA artists, Baj loved to experiment with materials and media. The exhibition

includes not only paintings and assemblages, but also ceramics, Meccano sculptures, publications and manifestoes. The exhibition begins in the 50s with works from the Arte Nucleare (Nuclear Art) movement, founded by Baj. Asger Jorn, co-founder of CoBrA (1948-1951), would later participate in this movement. Jorn also had a special bond with Baj. He wrote in 1953, "Dear Comrade, This is the first new connection I'm making since my years of isolation. It would be my pleasure to work together with you."

The exhibition includes Baj's series *Generali* (Generals) from the first half of the 60s, with which he also participated in the Venice Biennial in 1964. The Generals are absurd characters that partly consist of found objects like belts and medals. Works from the 60s also include sculptures from Meccano toys, which provide a commentary on the improvident use of technology and the automation of humans in society.



Enrico Baj, *Tu Quoque Brute Fili Mi*, 1964, S.M.A.K., Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst, Ghent. © photograph: Dirk Pauwels.

The exhibition closes with the 12-metre wide work *I funerali dell'anarchico Pinelli* (Funeral of the Anarchist Pinelli) from 1972. This work was a reaction to real events and was censored in Italy at the time, but then shown internationally in other museums like Museum Boijmans van Beuningen in Rotterdam.

Unfortunately, we must conclude that threats similar to those against which Baj protested still exist in our contemporary society. In an interview between artist Maurizio Cattelan and Baj, made especially for the catalogue, the comparison is made with the war in Syria and today's pressing environmental issues. For these reasons, the Cobra Museum also looks to contemporary protest groups. On 23 April the museum will collaborate with the Vrije Bond anarchist organisation on a so-called 'BAJeenkomst' gathering dedicated to lectures, poetry, anarcho-folk music, documentaries and a tour of the exhibition by art historian and anarchist Dick Gevers.

Enrico Baj: Play as Protest is curated by Carrie Pilto in collaboration with Luca Bochicchio in the role of research consultant. Theatre maker Beppe Costa has put together an audio tour especially for this exhibition.

The works in the exhibition come mainly from the Archivio Enrico Baj, Vergiate and from Fondazione Marconi in Milan. There are also valuable additional loans from private collections, from the Frans Hals Museum, Haarlem; S.M.A.K., Ghent; and Museo d'arte moderna e contemporanea di Trento e Rovereto.

If you would like to know more about this exhibition or Enrico Baj or to receive image material, please contact Eric Wie at the Cobra Museum via email e.wie@cobra-museum.nl or call +31(0)20 5475052. www.cobra-museum.nl

The Cobra Museum of Modern Art in Amstelveen is generously supported by the City of Amstelveen and the BankGiro Lottery.